

赤松中学（あかまつ・ちゅうがく）

生年月日、年齢、出身地、現住所に至るまで全てが不明の覆面作家。
『アストロノト!』で第3回MF文庫Jライトノベル新人賞優秀賞を受賞。
本作・武装学園小説『緋弾のアリア』は、同作家の2シリーズ目となる。

Illustration

◎こぶいち

ゆずソフト所属の原画担当。
代表作は『ぷらばん!』『EXE』『夏空カナタ』。
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あ-05-05



緋弾のアリアII

赤松中学



580



9784840126007

ISBN978-4-8401-2600-7
C0193 ¥580E



1920193005806

定価：本体580円（税別）
メディアファクトリー



緋弾のアリアII 燃える銀氷

東京武偵高校、そこは武力を行使する探偵——通称『武偵』を育成する特殊な学校。
強襲科の超エリートでSランクの最強武偵・アリアと、そのパートナーに選ばれて
しまった（普段は）ただの一般人・遠山キンジの今回の使命は、超能力捜査研究科
の期待の星で、キンジの幼なじみでもある白雪を誘拐魔・デュランダルから護衛す
ること、つまりボディガードだ。しかしキンジの目には白雪が狙われているよう
には見えず、やがてアリアとの仲に亀裂が入り……。忍び寄る敵!! 緋色の巫女に
秘められし力が魔剣を斬り裂く、大スケールアクション&ラブコメディー第2弾!!

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Ⅰ 赤松中学の本

アストロノト! [イラスト:bomi]

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緋弾のアリア [イラスト:こぶいち]

緋弾のアリアII 燃える銀氷
[イラスト:こぶいち]

緋弾の アリア

Aria the Scarlet Ammo



著：赤松中学
絵：こぶいち

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肥満のアリア

作：こぶいち



※この作品は『緋弾のアリア』本編とは関係ありません。

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MF文庫Jは、毎月25日発売・609円(税込)
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緋弾

Aria the Scarlet Ammo

ダイヤモンドダスト
燃える銀氷

II

赤松中学





Kanzaki H Aria

かんざき
神崎・H・アリア

二丁拳銃と二刀流を使いこなす、
常に独断専行の凄腕武偵
名探偵の遺伝子を受け継いでいる

アサルト
強襲科



インケスタ
探偵科

元・強襲科で、格付けは最低のEランク
しかし、ある特殊体質のせいでアリアの
パートナーに選ばれてしまった

とおやま

遠山キンジ

Kinji Tohyama

Shirayuki Hotogi

ほとぎ しらゆき
星伽白雪



武偵高の生徒会長で、キンジの幼なじみ
代々続く星伽神社の巫女で、鬼道術を使う

S S R
超能力捜査研究科

レキ Reki

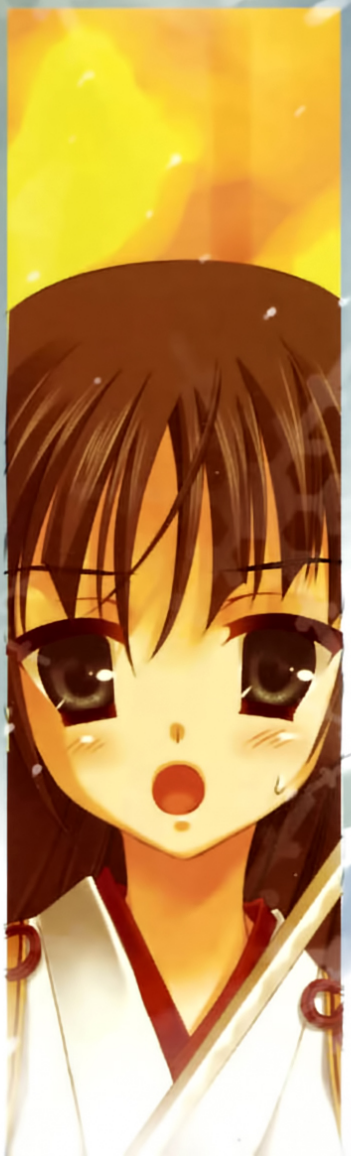
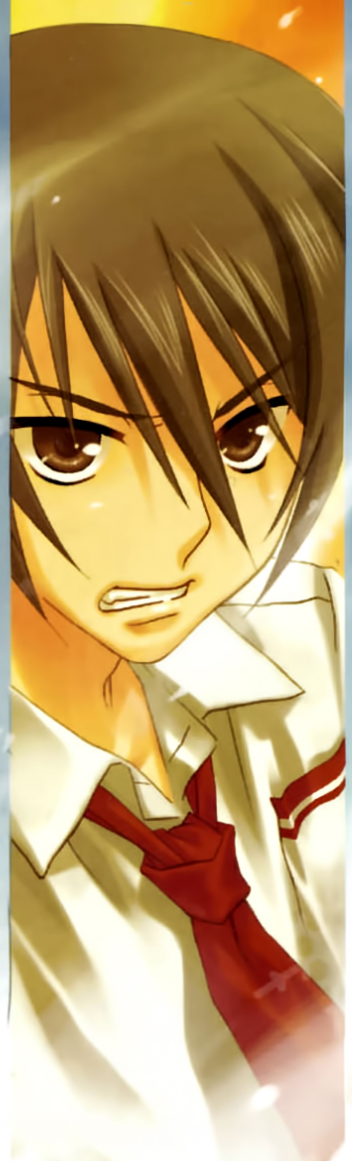
スナイプ
狙撃科

Sランクの狙撃の天才。無口で無表情
名字を知る者はなく、本人も知らないらしい



「お前は星伽^{ほとぎ}を裏切れない。

それがどういいうことを意味するか、
分かつているならな」



P11 1弾 武装巫女

P31 2弾 真剣白刃取り

P76 3弾 かごのとり

P141 4弾 人工なぎさ

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1st Ammo: Armed Shrine-Maiden

Shirayuki Hotogi is a **Yamato Nadeshiko**.

She is a modest classical Japanese girl with long and smooth black hair.

She's great in cooking, any kind of housework and would be a good wife and a great mother to everyone.

...It's what she should be.

She would never be the kind of girl waving her Japanese sword while screaming:

"I'll kill, kill, kill Aria and then I'll commit **seppuku**!"

...Normally.

"Why me?! You got the wrong person!"

Even the famous detective Sherlock Holmes the fourth, Lady Kanzaki H. Aria, seems to not understand why someone would take her life.

But that's to be expected.

Even I, who is her childhood friend, don't understand her.

I quickly thought about the clues leading up to this incident:

*Shirayuki, who returned from training asked me: "Is it true that you're living with a girl?" and sent me a total of 49 mails to my cellphone

*Shirayuki herself rushed in here *Shirayuki became like this immediately when she saw Aria

...No

I don't understand.

I can't think of a reason why Shirayuki would be that angry!

"Shirayuki! You, what did you misunderstand?"

Dong!

I just said half of the sentence when Aria suddenly kicked my back hard.

I, who had been kicked out directly on the wall of the corridor, fell down.

"Kinji, think quickly about a solution to this! If it's not your fault, why would this kind of thing happen?"

"Don't, don't blame this on me!"

"No! Kin-chan isn't wrong! It's Aria who's wrong! It's surely Aria who's wrong! Aria, you, this kind of person, disappear for me--!"

That's, that's not good.

Shirayuki--she has already lost herself in anger.

In fact... although I don't understand for what reason, Shirayuki has been occasionally like how she is right now, in front of my eyes, since she was young.

According to my experiences, if she turns herself into that state, she won't let it go. The victims don't even know--the victims were all girls--why they were beaten up so miserably.

"Great Punishment---!!!"

Shirayuki let out a shrill scream and charged towards Aria, producing a clanking sound with the wooden sandals she's wearing.

Woosh!

A downward slash, heading straight towards Aria's head.

How, how can it be?!

She, she really has the intention of killing someone!

"Owww!"

Aria screamed with a high-pitched voice like a rare cat.

Paaa--!

Aria stopped Shirayuki's sword with two hands.

(Bare, bare hand edge catch)

It's the first time that I saw someone use this in a real fight.

Aria, there's no doubt that you're the combat skills master.

Hey, Kinji, it isn't the time to admire this.

"You idiot woman!"

Aria tightly held the sword with both of her hands.

Tong! Shaa!

Aria's skirt leaped and she immobilized Shirayuki's right arm with both of her legs.

And, with a furious throw, twists Shirayuki's right arm up.

"**Valetudo**!?"

Shirayuki seems to see through Aria's school of fighting and right away, the clogs stomp on the ground with a 'dong'.

And 'bing'.

Aria finds herself wrapped around her own backhand, and roughly smacked to the floor.

Hey hey, my floor has already sunken down!

"Wuuu~ Disappear! Disappear, you fox demon! Disappear quickly in front of my Kin-chan!"

Shirayuki's legs fiercely send Aria flying.

"Ah?!"

Aria rolls out heavily, and 'bing', she collides with the room's sofa, buried underneath.

"S-Stop! Both of you stop!"

Sooo!

In front of the me who was screaming, under the destroyed sofa--.

Finally Aria, fired up, sends bullets flying from her pair of guns.

DangDang!

Although Shirayuki, very naturally blocks the bullets with her sword.

"I'm angry! I'm angrrrrrrrry! --I'll make you a windhole!"

Ping!

Aria, as if she was launched by a catapult, dives out from the sofa's wreckage with great speed.

While shooting until the cartridges are empty, Aria rushes close to Shirayuki-because the bullets were all blocked-

Shhh, Kla!!!

Just like her nickname, she takes out two short swords, and collides against Shirayuki's sword.

So, kla, klakla, klaaaaa--!

Both sides are on the defensive.

"Kin-chan, stab this woman from behind! That way you'll never get to see her again!"

"Kinji! Quickly come cover me! You're my partner!"

Being asked for help from the two of them at the same time--

I already...don't know what to do.

"...Do as you please. Fight until you two are pleased."

I hold my pained head, and...walk out of the room.

I pass by the two of them glaring at each other, open the ground window, and go to the balcony.

You ask me, why do I come to the balcony?

Because there's a cabinet here. And it's bulletproof.

"Kin-chan!"

"Kinji!"

I ignore the screams of the two of them, opened the cabinet and...went in.

Shirayuki the mad warrior.

The fighting genius, Aria.

This kind of monstrous battle, can a normal high school student like me stop it?

The answer is obviously NO.

That's why...I...

Decide to close the cabinet's door, escaping from this impossible reality.

If you want, you can call me a spineless guy. Do as you please.

But wouldn't anyone cherish his own life?

Hotogi mikos are also known as armed-shrine maidens.

It is said that no matter which place's shrine, ancestral post or shrine maiden, there are always people shouldering the mission of the gods. Although in Shirayuki's house, the Hotogi shrine, there seemed to be a problem and it turned into an armed protection agency.

As you see Shirayuki, you understand that the mikos of the Hotogi are very strong.

That's why Shirayuki can carelessly block bullets, something I have only done once before in Hysteria Mode.

And her source of energy, which is still not completely understood, because it is so difficult to analyze, seems to be some kind of 'supernatural ability'.

...

...Supernatural.

You don't believe me?

I don't want to believe it either.

Nevertheless users of supernatural abilities should technically exist. It seems that they are trained by the secret researchers of the special institutions in every country. So even in Butei High, there's an SSR.

So Shirayuki, who is already a gifted student, is currently developing an ability that surpasses those of normal humans.

A butei who uses supernatural abilities is called a 'choutei'^[1]. Even though there's still some doubt about them, supernatural abilities are becoming more and more important to Butei.

Haaa.. I sighed heavily.

--It's too abnormal.

I still want to go to a normal school and then become a normal adult some day.

Though recently, because of Aria, I have been pulled deeply into the supernatural world.

The battle outside seems to have stopped...to check whether it is over, I close my cellphone, put it in my pocket and quietly ...quietly sneak out from my bulletproof cabinet.

The scene of my room almost made me pass out.

The walls are all marked by bullets and sword cuts, and my furniture is all scattered in pieces on the floor.

It looks like an earthquake and a typhoon hit it at the same time.

And the earthquake and typhoon girls' hair is all messed up, their clothes are in chaos and their bodies are covered by dust and sweat. These two great bishoujos are both wounded and exhausted.

"Haa...Haa...You're really...stubborn, fox, fox, fox demon..."

Shirayuki uses her sword to hold herself up, barely standing, and panting heavily.

That's why her sword is stuck in my floor.

"You, it's you...who should quickly, quickly go down...haa, haa..."

Both of Aria's knees are on the floor, and she uses both her arms to support her body.

"Huh, is there a winner yet? It looks like a tie."

When both sides stop fighting because of exhaustion, a third party comes as a mediator. Those are the world's rules.

That's how I think, and now I'm urging them to make peace.

"--Kin-chan-sama!"

Shirayuki, who finally seems to notice me, sheathes her sword, and dizzily sits on the floor.

Her eyes that look like beautiful Obsidian, start to moisten, and she holds her face.

"I, I'll die as apology, if, if Kin-chan-sama abandons me, I'll immediately kill Aria and commit seppuku, as an apology towards you."

The way she speaks makes it harder for me to understand.

And also, what the hell is 'Kin-chan-sama'?

There are two honorific suffixes.

"I, I say...what's that...to abandon or not?"

"But, but even if you put male and female mice in a basket, the number will still increase!"

"Not only do I not understand, but also you skipped too much!"

Shirayuki quickly lifts her crying face after she hears me say these impatient words.

"A-A-Aria only wants to play with you, Kin-chan! Absolutely!"

"Hey, don't grab my collar."

"It's my fault, I don't have any courage, that's why Kin-chan you have, by a woman outside, and not inside, been..."

"He would be the same even if you were braver."

Aria says viciously from beside her.

"You, don't think that because you look like lovers you can do whatever you want, poisonous woman!"

Shirayuki says this while throwing me away -clang!- and takes out a chain sickle from her sleeve.

"Lo-Lovers!?"

Shla! the chain sickle that Shirayuki took out wraps Aria's left arm that holds the black M1911.

That way the two of them use all their strength and the chain sickle becomes tense.

"Don't, don't say rubbish! I, I-I-I-I, don't care about something like love!"

Aria, who is greatly scared about topics related to love, her face -huu!- became completely red as she shouted loudly.

"The kind of things like love--it's simply wasting time, I didn't do it, I didn't even think about it! I've never looked forward to it, and never looked for it! I don't even look forward to it!"

Why did you need to say it three times?

"So what's Kin-chan to you, Aria! Isn't he your lover?!"

"We don't have that kind of a relationship!"

Says Aria in a high-pitched tone.

"Kinji is my slave! He is only my slave!"

"S-S-Slave...?"

Shirayuki's face becomes completely white after she hears this, her mouth opened widely.

Afterward, she thought about something similar, and her face becomes as red as fire.

In fact her temper is also urgent.

"You, you actually...already with Kin-chan, played these kinds of forbidden games--!"

"You, youyouyou, what the heck are you saying! It's not like this!"

"It's definitively true! I already thought about the same thing the other way, so I know it all!"

"Nononononononnnn-ooo--! Kinji!"

Shaaa!

Aria, still fighting over the chains with Shirayuki, with her purple eyes, glares at me fiercely.

"It is 100% your fault that this weird woman became mad! Quickly think of a solution to this! Or else you'll regret it!"

I'm already doing it.

"...Uhh, that. Hey... Shirayuki, you first."

"Yes."

Shirayuki immediately let go of the chain and sits in Seiza before me.

Tong!

Because of what Shirayuki did, Aria fell to the ground and looked towards the sky. It's better to ignore her for now.

"Listen to me, Aria and I, we are only forming a temporary Butei team."

"Is it?"

"Yes, Shirayuki. You, you should know what's my nickname? Say it."

"...Misogynist."

"Yep."

"And, inept."

"It's got nothing to do with what's happening now."

"Ah, yes."

Don't say superfluous nicknames. It will make things more complicated.

"Now you should understand. Your anger, which I don't understand, is only a misunderstanding, without any meaning. How could I, with this kind of dwarf elementary school girl, - windhole - have that kind of relationship?"

Aria interrupted me in the middle of my sentence, but has still been ignored by me.

"But, but...Kin-chan."

Hmm?

The always obedient Shirayuki, rarely talks back to me.

"What?"

"That one..."

She raises her slender jade finger and points to my pants' pocket.

That..., it is the doll I caught with the doll-catching machine, the cat-fan animal, 'leopon', the cellphone attachment, was exposed.

This doll is a little bit big, so even if it's placed in the pocket with the cellphone, it'll still be exposed.

But... What's the problem with it?

I only see Shirayuki's finger, turning toward the already sitting Aria's skirt pocket.

There... it was as if the leopon was saying 'hello', also has his claws and head exposed.



"It's actually a pair-look--!"

Shirayuki starts shouting, Waaaaaaaah!, and tears start spurting from both eyes like a fountain.

"Pair-look?"

Without realizing that this century had anglicism, Aria's eyebrows slightly frown.

"Pair-look is what lovers do between them! I, I, I too have dreamed of it numerous times!"

"I--say--! Didn't I just tell you that my relationship with Kinji isn't that kind of thing! With this idiot, I don't even have one micro-micro-gram of that kind of relationship with him!"

Aahhh...

The peace talk can finally begin.

But I say, what does micro-micro-gram mean?

"Shirayuki."

I turn to Shirayuki, put my hands on her shoulders, and look straight into her eyes.

"You, don't believe what I just said?"

Shirayuki, seeing me act a bit serious, wipes away her tears that could not stop falling.

"N, No. I believe, I believe in you..."

Finally, in our third denial, her attitude softens.

And, wiping her tears, she raises her head, looks at me, and then looks at Aria.

"So, so, between Kin-chan and Aria, you two didn't do that kind of thing?"

She asks us coolly.

"What's 'that kind of thing'?"

"For example, kiss..."

Kiss.

Is it?

Is it kiss?

"..."

"..."

Aria and I look down, and turn slowly with a stone-like expression.

Aria's face looks like messaging red traffic lights, flashing, and flashing.

Speechlessly, she opens her mouth and closes it, stares hardy at me.

Ah, hey. Don't turn the hard questions to me.

That--in accordance with the truth, I should answer 'Yes', but it was only an emergency measure in the battle against Riko, it wasn't because of love...

"You...did...it...didn't you...?"

Shirayuki's pupils, while saying this, enlarges.

Her expression disappears in front of my eyes, and makes a Ha Ha, Ha Ha Ha, Waaaahahaha laugh.

Hey, hey Shirayuki!

That action right now is Rated-R!

"I-It's true we did that kind of thing... BUT!"

Shaa!

Lady Aria, from the other side, stands up fiercely for a reason I don't know.

And, forcefully, straightens up her fake chest that wouldn't become bigger anyway.

"B-but, don't, don't, don't worry!"

Don't worry?

"I just checked it yesterday! I, I-I, I..."

--I?

"I DIDN'T GET PREGNANT!"

Finishes Aria's sentence.

As if, I heard that.

...Clang...

The funeral clock rings.

...Why...would...she become pregnant...

Aria confidently folds her arms together, making a 'How is it?' expression.

Shuuuu.

A soul that looks like Shirayuki flies away from her body.

"--Shirayuki!?"

Gong!

Like this, Shirayuki falls down behind while sitting.

"A, Aria, you--why would you suddenly bring pregnancy into the conversation!"

"You...you irresponsible bastard! Don't you know how I was stressed in the dark after you did that?"

"Why would you be stressed!"

"Be, because father he, when I was young, said that you would get pregnant after you kiss."

It wouldn't be!

Hey, everyone from the Holmes family!

At least, you should give your child a sexual education!

"This kind of thing couldn't result in you being pregnant! Even an elementary schoolgirl would know that!"

"What's that!? Then tell me how you would get pregnant!? Say it!"

"Who, who, who would tell you, stupid!"

"Surely you don't know!"

"I know!"

"Then tell me!"

"Devil would tell you, stupid!"

While we were fighting with our faces blushing and our ears red, Wuuuu!, the foreheads close to hitting together.

Shirayuki, which I don't know when she regained consciousness--

Like smoke, she vanished from the house.

Hey, hey...

This affair, how did it turn into this?

2nd Ammo: Edge Catching

If you want to ask what happened to Aria and Shirayuki, it's obviously separated like light and darkness.

Labeling her 'One should learn everything by searching by oneself', Aria started to explore the secret of life creation by men and women, and seems to acknowledge that her physiology knowledge is wrong. That is why for a period of time after, she constantly acts strange every time she sees me, blushing. However, since she's the forgetful kind, she quickly returned to the one who furiously kicks, fiercely stamps, and often shoots multiple bullets at me for trivial things. Hah, please forget me.

And on the other side.....after that event, Shirayuki is clearly avoiding us.

Before, whether I was bothered by it or not, she would always take care of me, and since the battle against Aria, every time she sees me, she becomes like a bashful animal with a great sense of vigilance, and quickly hides.

Like this, one day, during lunch.

"Tohyama-kun. Can I sit here?"

While I was eating my steak enthusiastically in the school's canteen, and while Aria was eating her peach bun which she brought, a cool guy in front of my eyes asked me.

It was a bright handsome guy who asked.

His face showing an elegant smile, he appeared in front of me, the Assault's Shiranui Ryo.

In the past, he was often in the same team as I.

His Butei level is A. Even though there are different aspects involved in an A ranking, Shiranui's integration capacity is high. Barehanded, dagger handling or shooting aspects can all be relied on. The reliability of the gun he chose is very high, a Mk.23 MODO with an installed laser aiming lens.

After Shiranui sat down, he replaced my plate, which he had pushed with his own when he placed it down. And he didn't forget to apologize, nodding to me. He's really a good guy.

.....Also, this Shiranui guy, is very popular with the girls.

This can't be helped, since not only is he cool, but he is also a rare polite person in Butei High.

Although that's weird—before I was tied up with Aria, while I was always sticking together with Muto and Shiranui after school, but I never heard that he had a girlfriend.

"Kinji, I heard that you're called. If you dare escape I'll run you over."

Another one pushed aside my plate, and then with thorn-like hair, put his plate on the table. He is Muto Gouki.

He is the ace of Logi, and is renowned for the transport tools, a skilled driver that can operate anything from a car to a nuclear submarine.

Also, for the ease of maintaining it, this guy chose to use a Colt Python revolver. (T/L note: .357 magnum caliber).

Although the gun's loading capacity is small, and it cannot equip a suppressor, so normally no Butei would use it.

Additionally, no girl likes Muto. Even though he isn't a bad guy, he's too wild.

"What 'called'?"

"Kinji, did you have a fight with Hotogi-san?"

...No wonder this is Butei High.

Reports, no, trivial affairs spread abnormally quickly.

But Muto, why is your face showing displeasure.

"Hotogi-san looks very depressed, what actually happened?"

"What could happen between Shirayuki and I... by the way, Muto. You, did you see Shirayuki?"

"This morning, Shiranui said that he saw her doing flower divination in the greenhouse."

"What does 'flower divination' mean?"

"It's pretty popular,"

Shiranui's handsome eyebrows eased and said.

"I don't know. Do you know, Aria?"

Aria, who was sitting in front of me, shook her head with an 'I don't know' expression on her face when she was asked.

Her pair of twin tails move like the drumsticks of a rattle drum.

By the way, I'd like to tell everyone why Aria looks so calm. It is because her mouth is full of peach buns.

"Tohyama-kun, you should've heard about it. It's taking a flower and peeling off the petals one by one, counting while saying 'loves me-loves me not-loves me-loves me not'...that kind."

Aaah. It was actually that.

I didn't think that there would be people nowadays who still did the things like they were done in the Showa era.

That Yamato Nadeshiko is really a rare product from heaven.

"Even though she noticed me seeing her, the preparation bell for the first period rang...so the divination was interrupted. But it seems that she cried... Tohyama, why did you two break up? Did your love towards her already cool off?"

Wuuu, the sound of Aria choking on the peach buns resound.

...Love shouldn't be a subject that can't be easily mentioned.

It would make that brat overreact.

"Say... I don't know how things became like this, but the relationship between Shirayuki and me isn't that kind. We are only childhood friends."

"Childhood friends, is it? This has often been the reason to get rid of the other one. I heard that Kanzaki-san was furiously jealous, and shot at Hotogi-san. Based on my deduction, Tohyama-kun and Kanzaki-san were progressing smoothly, and so, the two girls fought against each other...is it? Because of Kanzaki-san, we are all talking about Tohyama-kun in Assault. And very cheerfully, it seems."

Woahwoahwoah!



Kanzaki H. Aria's cheeks turned red instantly, and she swallowed the peach bun in one gulp.

"You, you, you---PERVERT!"

For some reason, she punched me in the face.

Hey. That move is too weird.

If you want to beat up someone, it should be Shiranui.

"I'll clearly tell you. It wasn't because I was jea-jealous that I chased out Shirayuki. Kinji and I are only companions. It isn't something about love. For sure, for sure, for---sure, it isn't like what you said. These are my real heartfelt words."

You don't need to deny it that forcefully.

"Ah, so it's like that. That means Tohyama-kun has an opportunity of reconciling with Hotogi-san?"

"What do you mean by reconcile? Say, Shiranui, you just spoke about when the preparation bell rang, but I saw Shirayuki in the normal campus walking in the hallway, and that time she didn't even salute me and entered the women's bathroom. You surely saw wrong. Also, reconciling or not, I don't need your advice."

"You're right. I'm sorry."

Shiranui made a godfather-like smile and apologized to me, and that made me stop investigating any further.

He turned his head, and whispered in Aria's ears 'Tohyama-kun is really in a bad mood' or something like that.

As for the other one, Muto...his face showed that he wanted to ask something, but it was difficult to say. Well, Muto's face being weird is something normal anyway.

"...Oh, Shiranui."

I didn't want to be asked about Shirayuki, so I decided to change the topic.

"You, what are you going to do about the Adseard sport event. Haven't you been chosen as a representative?"

Adseard sport event—a yearly international Butei competition, and at the same time an international high school competition, similar to the Olympics.

Although it is obviously different from the normal Olympics, since this competition has Assaulters and Snipers, it's overflowing with the smell of gunpowder.

"I shouldn't appear on scene, since I'm only a substitute."

"Are you helping out with the festivities? What do you want to do? That's something you can't do."

"I still haven't made my final decision. What should I do?"

Shiranui released a listless sigh that could make girls fall for him.

And opposite of him, Muto had his mouth full of Yakisoba bread, and still had some fried noodles around his jaws. (?)

"What will you do in the Adseard competition, Aria?"

"I won't be participating in it. Even though they chose me as a member for the gun team, I refused."

"So will you help with the festivities? What have you decided on?"

"I'll be a cheerleader during the closing ceremony."

"Cheerleader...? Oh, you mean Aru=Kata."

Aru=Kata^[2], it's the Italian word for [Weapon] fused with the Japanese word for [Form]. It's slang for Butei, a combination of swordsmanship and marksmanship in a cheerleading routine, as well as a parade.

And the girls in Butei High, not knowing the meaning of the word 'Taboo', called themselves 'Cheerleaders'.

"Kinji is my partner, so you should help me. You don't have anything else to do, right?"

"Ah, ahh..."

This festival was originally supposed to make 'Butei' more popular among the people who didn't like them.

It could be that the organizers thought that if the dancers were cute, it would turn out better. So, all the dancers are girls, dressed up like cheerleaders.

And the boys play instruments in the back, inconspicuously.

"Music, huh. Although I'm average...it's as good as anything."

"Ah. If Tohyama-kun is doing it, then I will too. Why don't you come too, Muto-kun?"

said Shiranui, flashing a smile as gentle as the spring breeze, while looking at Muto and me.

Hey, you always just go with the flow like this...

"A band? It shouldn't be too bad. Alright, I'll do it."

Muto agreed too.

You two, you never have any plans of your own.

Well, I'm in no place to lecture them.

"But...Kanzaki-chan, it's a shame that you refused to be part of the marksmanship team. This may be common knowledge, but did you know? If you get a reward at Adseard, then you're set for life. Not only will you receive a scholarship for Butei University, but you'll also be employed more often. You could easily join a Butei Section, or even start your own private Butei office, you know?"

"I don't need such things that are so far in the future. There's something I need to do right now. I can't take my own sweet time to practice for the competition."

Something she has to do.

From her firm voice, that's...

Probably saving her mother, Kanzaki Kanae-san.

To save her mother, Kanae-san, who carries false charges, Aria carries the heavy responsibility of tracking down and defeating the real culprits--the 'Butei Killer' that we fought earlier, Riko Mine. Lupin the 4th is one of them--she has to spend all her time and constantly risk herself to capture them, a cruel fate.

Also, for me, who is her partner--I carry the same fate.

Riko, who regrettably managed to escape from us during the plane-jacking incident, is the person who killed my brother.

For that matter at least, I will finish it. I will take revenge.

And Riko...said my brother, who should have died, is alive. Although I feel that that was just something she said to provoke me, to be honest, I have some doubts.

"Other than Adseard,"

Aria, who continued to speak, clutched her arms to herself, and stretched her upper body backwards.

She appeared to be trying to gain some height so she could look down on me properly. It's a shame that you're only 1.42 meters.

"Kinji, tuning you is more important."

"...Tu-tuning? Are you two playing some sort of weird game...?"

Muto's face started twitching, he looked back and forth between Aria and I.

"...You're saying exactly the same thing as Shirayuki. And Aria...why can't you just say training in front of other people?"

"Shut up, you're my slave, of course I'll call it tuning."

Hey, didn't you say I was your partner just now?

Once you're happy then I'm demoted back to slave?

"Anyways, how do you plan on 'tuning' me?"

"About that...Mmm-. From tomorrow onwards, you'll exercise with me every morning."

whisper

Aria, who appeared to have just thought up this amazingly horrible idea, happily whispered "Mm, good idea," to herself.

Damn it. I brought this upon myself. I shouldn't have talked about Adseard.

The morning of the following day, 7:00 AM.

I followed Aria's orders, who had put two guns to my head last night, and came to the agreed place extremely early...

"Who am I?"

I turned my head to face Aria, who had just covered my eyes with her hands, staying silent.

So-

So cute.

"Aah, really. I didn't expect that you'd be caught so easily. You're full of openings."

Aria, who had dropped down on her heels with a thump, and with her hands placed on her waist...

Was in a cheerleading outfit.

Butei High's cheerleading outfit had a rarely seen black design.

On the sleeveless blouse, there was a hole at the chest area, and I could see Aria's creamy white skin through it. Normally, this opening would be a heart, or a star. However, as expected of the Butei High uniform, it was bullet shaped.

I carefully looked down at her skirt. It was so short that it would definitely show off **Gunchira** (the moment where one can see the guns hidden beneath the skirt. The creator was Moron Muto).

"Th...that outfit, what is it?"



"Isn't it obvious? It's a cheerleading outfit of course. There has to be a limit to your stupidity, you know?"

"You have no right to tell me that. I was asking you, 'Why are you dressed up like that?'"

"Then why didn't you just come out and say that, idiot? This was for the cheerleading practice that I'll be doing while tuning you. If I do both at the same time, we won't waste as much time, right?"

Aria said, looking around the room otherwise devoid of people, with a satisfied expression.

This is--a place in one of the corners of the artificial island where Butei High lies, called 'Signposts'.

It's a narrow piece of land between the back of Rainbow Bridge's huge signpost and the stadium.

I didn't think that Aria, an exchange student, would find a deserted place like this to train me so quickly. Also, she decided to solve the matter of her own training at the same time.

"...Then, what am I going to do?"

"Ahem."

ChiAria^[3] postured gracefully, and cleared her throat.

Though really, she's exactly like a child.

She may be extremely cute, but it also annoys me a little.

"In my heart, you are an S rank Butei."

"Only in your heart."

"Don't just interrupt me."

Seeing Aria reach for her guns, I shut up, for the sake of my continued existence.

"An S rank in Assault also carries the connotation that, you 'as one person, have the same abilities as a person in special forces'."

How is that possible?

"You have those skills, and you're able to use them sometimes. However, you don't have a way to draw out your latent power. So what we need, is a 'Key' to unlock your abilities."

Aria said with the air of a teacher.

Although, I knew that even in her dreams, Aria couldn't possibly guess that she herself, is that key.

"So, according to my investigation after the plane-jacking--you have schizophrenia."

Schizophrenia, huh?

Hehe, you guessed wrong.

Hysteria Mode isn't something like a psychogenic effect. Rather, it's one that affects the nervous system.

Which means that it's completely different from schizophrenia.

Though...I pretended to be listening to her intently, deciding to let her continue on this line of thought.

"Isn't that right? You should be able to understand now."

Oh Aria. Please continue to investigate in the completely wrong direction.

"I learned about this on the internet and in books. It's pretty interesting. So, you probably received some trauma when you were young that caused you to create another personality, and you can only change into that during the heat of battle."

"So that's what it is."

"You changed during the bike-jacking and plane-jacking incident, after all."

"That's right."

"So--the first stage of our special training is to constantly put you in a situation where you feel the pressure of battle!"

Aria finished speaking, and although she was dressed like this, she drew the wakizashi hidden in her back with a *CHI!*

"--Ah, Hey, wait!"

"What? I'll use my guns on you later, don't worry."

"That isn't it! If you slash me with that I'll be cut into pieces!"

"Anyways, in your head, at most, you have but a spoonful of brains. However, that got me thinking. I've got to do things in order, right?"

Aria said those infuriating words casually.

"This training involves putting pressure on you, who is in Idiot Kinji Mode right now, until you wake up and fight back. A methodical training."

"Fight back...?"

"You still don't understand? You're hopeless. Then I'll explain this step by step, so just stand there and listen to what I'm saying, while crying and cleaning out your ears, OK?"

If somebody really cries and cleans out their ears at the same time, they've got to be insane.

"1: You, who is in Idiot Kinji Mode right now. 2: will awaken in combat. 3: and then fight back. That's what I think, and is the ideal order of events."

So, that's how it is.

This is the plan that allows you to be so patronizing? Your naivete is at the level of mental retardation.

If she declares herself as the descendant of the world famous detective, Sherlock Holmes the 4th...then I'm sure that the English government would investigate her DNA for the sake of the country's reputation. Really.

"So, what you should learn is, counter skills."

"Counter skills?... What's that?"

"First up is 'Edge Catching'."

Aria's voice had just faded when she held up her wakizashi.

"Wai--"

She swung faster than I could shout "Wait!"

Kich!

The sound of the blade slicing through wind brushed past my ear.

Now, Aria, using a speed which I couldn't follow, sliced down towards my shoulder with her wakizashi.

--However, she withdrew the blade before it touched me. I didn't see it at all.

Fu.

That light Gardenia scent, following the wind that Aria's movements created, wafted towards me.

"Alright. First up, imagine the scene just now 500 times. You have 10 minutes."

Aria looked up with those camellia eyes, at me, who was speechless.

"...Imagine?"

"That's right. Think of the slashing movement just now, and imagine catching it in your hands. It's like image training for boxing. You can move your hands in reality, if you like."

Fyuu, Kich.

Aria, with a sophisticated flowing movement, returned the blades to the sheath on her back.

"So...it's just like image training?"

"What did you think? Did you think it would be imagining pimples appearing on your face?"

"I got it, I got it. I won't be able to do it anyways."

I sighed heavily, and without any other options, I started to imagine catching Aria's sword.

Aria, observing me, nodded, finally satisfied.

"Alright. Kinji is much nicer when he's obedient. Good boy. I-U, which got my mother arrested, apparently has an expert swordsman in their ranks. Edge Catching is a basic skill for Butei, anyways. You have to master it, OK?"

Aria said, smiling like an older sister.

...Being treated like a child, looks like I'm really hopeless.

"Alright, I'm starting the countdown: 9 minutes and 59 seconds, 58."

"I'm doing it, I'm doing it."

"You're banned from saying anything unnecessary. As punishment, I'm decreasing your time by 30 seconds!"

...Are these Aria's rules?

You're exactly like a dictator.

"...Anyways, well...I'll do as you say."

I lightly sighed.

I don't care about the key to Hysteria Mode...

After all, I've made this decision before.

There's no way that I'll become an Ally of Justice.

(I'll just do what Aria wants.)

However this seems like I'm just urging myself on, I'm not doing it because she's cute, or because I like her. It's only because 'Great men keep their promises'.

Therefore, the other thing I decided on--changing to a normal school, and living as a normal person, with a normal life--I haven't given that up.

While I was thinking this and doing image training.

Aria took an iPod out of her skirt...

I turned to look...on the touchscreen of the iPod, a video was playing.

That was a video of a demonstration of Aru=Kata. Now that I think about it, I, who followed Aria's instructions, and signed up for the band, also received a video from the Adseard Preparation Committee.

"Mmm...that's cute."

Aria said to herself, and walked a little away from me, she turned around...

Tap.

Tap tap.

She started dancing, all alone.

Ooh! She's pretty good.

Although I'm not interested in cheerleading routines, nor do I understand them, but with her strawberry-blond hair shaking, Aria's movements made even an amateur like me think that she was an awesome cheerleader.

This dance starts off the same as a normal routine--Tap, tap tap.

While slowly, the movements turn into Martial Arts [Kata], becoming fierce.

Since that's the case, letting the cute Aria dance while wearing a cheerleader's uniform...she's pretty attractive.

Aria, continuing to switch from swords to guns, kicked one leg towards the sky, forming a POSE.

It seemed as if she wasn't embarrassed, since she was wearing bloomers, not panties, so she continued with her movements casually. However, she really is amazing at whatever she does.

Pui pui pui. Pui pui pui.

Aria raised her Pom Poms, and flashed a [☆] smile.

Those Eichornia eyes which are always flared in anger, and even though she's just smiling as part of the performance, the effect was twice as that of normal. Even if I'm not sure what exactly it's affecting.

On the other hand...Aria, practicing her cheerleading...

If I just look at her appearance, It really makes me think that she's just a normal girl.

I thought that even if she were practicing in a normal high school, nobody would think she's abnormal. They would just think she's slightly willful, yet full of energy.

"Hey...Kinji?"

Aria suddenly stopped, and those camellia eyes bore into me, her twin tails swishing in the air as she stared back at me.

"Why were you staring at me so intently just now? How filthy."

Hmph! Aria put her hands, still holding Pom Poms, on her waist. However, she noticed that her skirt was a little uplifted, and she used her hands, still holding Pom Poms, to fix it.

"I'm not juggling, you know?"

I'm not sure why she became embarrassed, but her cheeks started reddening.

"If you look at the principles, a cheerleading routine is like juggling, right? And anyways, I don't really want to look at you dancing."

Actually, after having been staring at Aria so long, I felt a little bad and turned my head away.

"Then why are you looking?"

"Wh-why do you care?"

"...This is also..."

"..."

Ah-

What's with this atmosphere?

"Let's forget about that for now, did you do your image training properly? There's only 5 minutes left before I start the reverse edge training."

"Reverse edge?"

It would still hurt a lot.

It's like being hit with an iron bar, after all.

"We'll start slowly, don't get scared. But, we will slowly get faster-"

Hehe. Aria said, while smirking sinisterly.

"Ouch..."

I massaged my muscles, which were still painful even after school, and exited the Inquesta school building.

Damn it. Aria, that sadist. Even if she used reverse edge, she still beat me up so mercilessly.

I think that a lot of English words and History dates were knocked loose by her.

"Kinji."

Aria came running out of the sunset.

It appears that she was lying in ambush at the Inquesta entrance again.

"I'll say this in advance, but I won't be training with you after school. I still have some subject-related work to do."

"I didn't say anything yet."

"Also, I won't return to Assault. If you force me to go back to that suicide squad, I won't be your partner anymore. Before I switch schools next year, I'm going to stay in Inquesta and continue my peaceful life."

"I still haven't said anything."

Aria pretended to not hear my cutting remarks, and turning around, she went to the bus stop.

Although, turning her head, she flashed a brilliant smile at me, saying,

"But, we're going to train tomorrow too, you know."

...Well, I'm fine if you say things like that.

After all, I'm your partner.

Also, if I refuse her three times, then she'll definitely 'make me some holes'.

"Ah Kinji, today, Assault had a practice session against throwing knives--"

Aria, who was pouring an endless stream of chatter about dangerous objects which I had no desire to hear about in my ears, seemed to be quite happy, recently.

The reason was very clear.

Probably because I'm acting more and more like her partner.

Just like that famous detective, Sherlock Holmes, who had John H Watson by his side, Aria's bloodline--the Holmes family--all thought that they could only draw out their full power with a partner by their side.

Therefore, this girl who was called an [Aria]...this Aria who was always alone, looked everywhere. Plus this isn't an exaggeration, she really looked all over the planet.

And, she finally found one in Tokyo's Butei High.

--The me in Hysteria Mode--

Although I can't always activate that power, but I'm the only one able to be her partner.

"Hey, Kinji."

"What is it?"

"Ahh, never~mind."

"You're annoying..."

The sailor uniform's skirt would flutter from time to time, as we walked up the road. Aria, who like just now, would turn around to check whether I was still there, was driving me crazy.

"Anyways, shouldn't you start looking for another companion...? Wouldn't it be better to find at least two, maybe three people and form a squad?"

Moreover, I was hoping she would find someone able to protect this girl.

"I don't need any companions. Also, I'm not good at getting along with others." That I know too well.

"Also, I was originally able to fight alone, as long as I have a partner that can keep up with me, I'm fine. So, once I finish with your tuning, I'll be satisfied. I'm fine with just you."

Damn it.

Doesn't that mean, I'm going to have to take care of this girl forever?

Faced with this unavoidable fate, I...

"...head hurts. I got hit by you so many times."

"You'll be fine if you take an aspirin."

"The only thing that can cure my headaches and colds is the Yamato product 'Special Pueraria Syrup'."

"Special? What does that mean?"

"It means they concentrate the original ingredients. They add Pueraria, a common herb of the Ephedra family."

"Drinking that kind of thing, you're exactly like an old man. Then go drink some. I'm going to hit you tomorrow too, you know."

"I'm out... Also, that can only be bought from Ameyoko. Going there is extremely troublesome too. The pharmacy is right between Ueno and Okachimachi, it's very far from either railway station."

"Kinji."

Aria suddenly called out to me.

I should've known that she wouldn't listen to what I was saying. She stopped in front of Masters.

"Look at this."

"...What?"

I looked at the public notice that Aria was pointing at...

"Calling a student 2nd year SSR B Group Hotogi Shirayuki"

The Masters want Shirayuki to drop by?

...That's certainly rare.

I didn't expect that the averaging above 75-honors student, student council president, gardening club president, arts and crafts club president, the Shirayuki, who other than from the event where she assaulted Aria, had a completely and utterly perfect life...would be summoned.

"Aria. Di-did you report the assault from Shirayuki to the masters?"

"--I'm nobility."

Aria's camellia eyes stared at me.

"I wouldn't do something low like complaining to the teachers about my own problems. Even if she's the one who provoked me. Don't underestimate me."

Ah--.

Like Aria said, that really is worthy of praise.

As I was feeling a little surprised, Aria, by my side, used her slender finger to press her mouth, and she said,

"Kinji, this is a good opportunity to get away from that crazy girl."

Placing her own craziness on the shelf...no, on the roof, she turned towards me.

"--We have to investigate this matter, and find her weakness!"

You...didn't you just say that nobility wouldn't stoop this low?

"Weakness...what are you thinking of doing? Shirayuki hasn't approached you since."

"...Are you serious?"

Huh?

"Recently, every time I'm alone, I can feel something from a different door. I can feel somebody hiding there, and my phone calls are broken off as if somebody is listening in--"

....

"At the bottom of normal stairs, water will suddenly start pouring down, a dart will come out of nowhere, and there's even traps!"

...Hey...

"I received a letter with 'VIXEN!' on it, as well as a picture of a fox drawn on it!"

I still think that that's a little cute.

"--Anyways! That woman hates me to the very soul! And Kinji, not noticing this at all...you're way too slow! You piece of trash!"

"So that's how it is..."

"That's still the good part."

...Good?

"Not long ago, I opened a drawer on my wardrobe, and then I noticed that there was a device set up with piano wire! And also, knowing that--well, because of my height...--I wouldn't be able to get my clothes without reaching inside, they put the trap exactly where my head would be!"

That...isn't a joke anymore.

If the small Aria didn't notice, and reached her head in then with a 'KCH!'...

That kind of dangerous device is only learned by those in Assault year 3 or Lezzad...

"Kinji. While Shirayuki is summoned by the Masters, you and I are..."

Facing Aria, who was in a rage, frowning at me--

Ordered me to do something, the most horrifying thing yet.

"Going to infiltrate Masters together!"

Tokyo Butei High is dangerous no matter where you go, but inside there are the terrifying '3 danger zones'.

They are,

Assault.

The underground warehouse.

And, Masters.

Well, you might ask, why would Masters, the teacher's department, be so dangerous?

The answer is simple.

The teachers at Butei High are all...dangerous.

Well, you'd probably expect that that is the case. After all, people that could be teachers at this crazy place could not possibly be normal themselves.

From what I know, the teachers here were in the special forces, the mafia, and mercenary forces, as rumored assassins...

At any rate, it could be said that this is the gathering place for dangerous people, who certainly won't listen to reason.

Of course, departments like Inquesta and Connect have more normal teachers, but that's a horribly small minority.

"Kinji. I can't reach it. Lift me up."

The person who whispered this is Aria-sama, towards me, her slave.

Now, we've already entered the tiger's den - Masters.

"...OK, OK."

Well, if I were to refuse, Aria would probably beat me to a pulp before starting to make some holes in me.

Looking from that perspective, maybe it would be better to risk the teachers, even if they would sooner kill me than look at me.

I had already resigned myself to this horrible fate. We were currently trying to sneak into Masters' corridor, so I was helping Aria into the vents leading up into the ceiling.

If I hold her properly, she'll probably say I'm molesting her again, so I, in a method reminiscent of holding a child, helped Aria reach the vents on the ceiling.

"Alright. A little farther-higher."

My resigned voice whispered, when,

"I'll make a hole in you!"

Bang!

Aria's knee, covered in her black knee-socks, drove deep into my chest. At least 10 centimeters in.

"...Uu...Ku...Oh...!"

She ignored my moaning, and pulled her body up into the vent. The part between her skirt and knee-socks, (I remember now, this is what Muto said was '**Zettai Ryouiki**', the completely revealed section of the thigh) flashed

before my eyes, and with a *tap*, she stepped on my head, climbing into the vent.

Afterward, Aria turned around and helped pull me up, then continued to crawl forward.

I was lingering behind my twin-tailed master's skirt, since I felt that there would be some danger of going into Hysteria Mode, however--I was saved by the fact that the vent was so dark. I can't see her Zettai Ryouiki, let alone her skirt.

Kch Kch.

Kch Kch Kch Kch.

I looked forward...

CHIIIIIIIIII.

Only to see Aria crawling forward at an abnormal speed.

Only at a corner, exerting myself, could I catch up to her.

"Aria."

"What?"

"You're crawling really fast..."

"I'm good at this. I'm the fastest among the girls in Assault."

"That's to be expected."

"Why?"

"There's nothing restricting your movement."

"What're you talking about?"

"Breasts."

Bang!

Aria, who had already spun around, planted a foot on my temple.

At least 10 centimeters in.

Shirayuki--found her.

She had been summoned to one of the teacher's rooms.

We peeked from inside the narrow vent.

This left Aria and I with no other choice than to stick our heads together.

If this is misconstrued as physical contact...and Aria starts raging, I'll be the one that suffers. So, I pushed my head away, and glanced to the side...watching Aria.

Watching Aria, who was extremely close, scan the scene down below through the vent entrance...

--Urgh.

Damn it.

She's breathtakingly cute.

Although acknowledging this makes me angry, but Aria is really amazingly cute.

Not only does she have a refinement akin to a doll's, but she also is full of emotions.

She can smile, she can be hurt, and like her focus now, they all grip your heart, an attractiveness similar to the stars in Hollywood. Having expressions like that...that's cheating.

"Hotogi..."

The woman inside the room softly called Shirayuki's name.

The homeroom teacher of 2B as well as the head of department of Dagula--Tsuduri-sensei was sitting on a black leather seat while crossing her legs, outfitted with boots.

Shirayuki was sitting opposite her, dipping her head.

"Recently, your grades have been...slipping..."

Fu, expelling a smoke-ring, Tsuduri-sensei, even inside the classroom, was wearing a jet black coat.

The way she was wearing the coat was scruffy, reminiscent to the way Mad Scientists wear their coats in manga.

The black leather holster between her thighs showed off her jet-black gun, a Glock 18.

Tsuduri--even among the teachers in Butei High, she's particularly dangerous.

First is that expression, always staring straight at you. It looks like she's always on drugs. Also, that smoke...freely wafting over to you, the smell of tobacco that is most definitely not available through legal means, is it really alright to freely smoke that in Japan?

Tsuduri's black-gloved hand crushed the butt of her cigarette into the ashtray.

"Ah...Well, studies don't mat-ter any-ways."

Hey. You're a teacher, should you be saying that?

It's because of teachers like you that Butei High's average grades don't exceed 50.

"It's...hmm...ah...right, your change. It's your change that I want to know about."

The fact that Tsuduri was able to forget such a simple word is extremely worrying, but don't let her simple looks deceive you. In one way, she's one of the elite Butei.

And that 'way' is, interrogation.

In this art, she's one of the best five in Japan.

I'm not sure how she does it, but no matter how firm the offender, after Tsuduri's interrogation, they won't stay normal, and it seems they start referring to her as Queen or Goddess.



"Hey-, I'll just ask you directly. Hotogi, have you come into contact with that guy?"

"Do you mean, Durandal?"

Hearing Shirayuki's words--

Aria's eyebrows shot up.

Durandal.

I only saw this on one of the notices...but I remembered the name.

I remember, he only targeted those Butei with special abilities - 'Choutei'--for kidnapping.

However, news of Durandal's existence has been spread around for a long time already.

Also, nobody's ever seen him. So, for those Choutei that have been kidnapped, well, they've actually gone missing for other reasons, right? Most people take this view.

So now, nobody really believes that he exists, turning that offender into something of an urban legend.

"I haven't. Also...even if Durandal really exists, he won't come find me, he'll probably go after better Choutei, right..?"

"Hotogi. You have to have more confidence in yourself. You're the ace of Butei High, right-?"

"Ho-how is that possible?"

Shirayuki, extremely embarrassed, looked downwards.

"Hotogi, I've said this many times, but why don't you just have me assign you a bodyguard. Lezzad has sent a report saying that there's a high chance that you've been targeted by Durandal. And the SSR also said something similar, right?"

"But...a bodyguard...that..."

"Is there a problem?"

Tsuduri tore up some paper that looked like an English dictionary, and rolled up a mysterious herb, putting it in her mouth.

"I wish to take care of one of my childhood friends...if someone is always by my side, then..."

"Hotogi, the Masters are worried about you. It'll be Adseard soon, a lot of outsiders will be inside the school. If only for that period of time, find an exceptional Butei to be your bodyguard. That's an order-"

"...But, isn't Durandal a non-existent offender..."

"This is an order-. Because this is an extremely important case, as a teacher, I'll say this twice. However, if I have to say it for the third time, things will get scary-"

Tsuduri lit her cigarette, and with a *fuu* she blew a mouthful of smoke into Shirayuki's face.

Hey, Tsuduri.

I don't care about you, but what happens if Shirayuki does something stupid again?

"Ke, ke. Ah...OK. I understand."

Shirayuki, teary eyed from the smoke, finally nodded.

(...)

Hearing their conversation, I finally understand why Shirayuki was called in.

Because the Choutei Shirayuki, could be targeted by 'Durandal'...and also she seemed to have received a warning from the school, recently.

Therefore, Masters ordered Shirayuki to obtain a bodyguard.

...That kind of thing, it's not like I couldn't do it.

Since in Butei High, there are a lot of students that receive such warnings.

Although most of them have never been attacked.

And also, the SSR's predictions are extremely suspicious, Lezzad makes a lot of mistakes too.

Furthermore the enemy, is possibly the non-existent offender, Durandal.

Which also means--

This is just Masters' over-protectiveness.

The honor student Shirayuki is one of the hopes of the Masters, so they can't let anything happen to her. So they'll react so heavily to such unconfirmed reports, issuing an order to make her acquire a bodyguard.

Poor Shirayuki. Being played around with by those adults, it must be horrible.

While my mouth was shaped into the [^] character...

Crash!

Aria.

She kicked open the grate of the vent.

"Wa...! You..!"

Aria kicked me away, who was trying to hold her back by pulling on her clothes--and dived down!

She rushed out of the vent, her skirt fluttering as she descended into the room.

Shirayuki, Tsuduri, and I opened our eyes in shock.

Now that I think about it, although I was unable to see it from my current position, but in that movement just now, the view under her skirt must have been fully exposed, right? No...I don't actually know what was exposed.

"--I, Kanzaki H. Aria, will be her bodyguard!"

Aria shouted out as she hit the floor, making me extend too far in shock-

Rumble, rumble.

"Uu...uwaahh!"

Thud.

I fell onto Aria, who was directly beneath me.

"Uwaah!?"

"Uwaah!?"

Aria, whose back buckled from the impact, recovered and pushed me to one side.

"Ki-Ki-Kin-Kinji! Don't stick your idiotic face into weird places!"

Aria, shouting while blushing, was captured by Tsuduri, holding her like a cat.

And I, standing up--Ku, was picked up by the scruff of my neck. *rattle*, *thud*.

Together with Aria, I was thrown against the wall.

He-hey, you did that way too hard, Tsuduri.

"Hmm?--What are you two?"

Tsuduri stuck her face in front of Aria and I.

"Oh? Isn't it the couple from the plane-jacking."

Shi-, she took a deep drag of her cigarette, and blew it out with a "Fu." She looked up, a weird smile on her face, her throat working. Woah...she's really...scary.

Also, don't call us a couple.

"This one is Kanzaki H. Aria--she uses a pair of Colt M911s and 2 kodachi. Her title is 'Quadra'. An S rank Butei stationed in Europe.

However--everything you've done up till now, from the reports, seems to have been solo missions from the London Butei Section. Because you have no coordination at all. You really are an idiot."

Tsuduri picked up one of Aria's twin-tails, examining her while spouting out her record.

"Le-let go of me, it hurts. Also, I'm not an idiot. A noble does not show off her accomplishments. Even if others claim the accomplishments as their own, I won't deny it!"

Aria, who wasn't afraid of Tsuduri at all, bared her canines while replying.

"Ah-. Such a pointless position. I'm glad I'm just a commoner. Anyways, your weakness... now that I think about it, you can't sw..."

"Uwaah--!"

The thing Tsuduri was about to say led Aria to start screaming to block out her voice, waving her hands violently.

Also, she was so agitated she started blushing, her mouth opening and closing repeatedly.

Can't sw...what?

"Tha-tha-that isn't a weakness! I'm fine as long as I have a life ring!"

Oooh, so that's how it is.

Aria, you've exposed yourself.

Shirayuki seemed to be taken aback by what had been happening, so she didn't really understand, but I understood very well.

You--can't swim.

Haha. I've learned something good today.

Tsuduri, GOOD JOB!

"Mm--"

Tsuduri released Aria, who was at her wit's end, and looked towards me, who was lovingly fantasizing about Aria drowning in a kiddie pool.

"And this one is, Tohyama Kinji-kun."

"Ah-...this wasn't my idea, I was forced by Aria..."

"He's antisocial. He has the tendency to distance himself from others."

Tsuduri, who was trying to remember while speaking, appeared to have remembered the statistics of all her students.

"However, a lot of the people in Assault look up to you, so you're respected as someone with a lot of potential. A sort of charisma, I guess. The missions you have solved...I remember, you went to Omi to find a cat, and the flight ANA600 plane-jacking incident... Hey, aren't those two things too far apart?"

"Please don't ask me that."

"Your weapon is... an illegally modified Beretta M92F."

Panic.

"It can fire in bursts of three or full auto, you nicknamed it Kinji Model, right?"

"Ah-, that...it was broken during the plane-jacking incident. Right now I'm using an American gun as a make-shift replacement. It's completely legitimate."

"Hehe. You've already made an appointment to get it modified by Amdo, right?"

Bullseye.

"Uwaah, that burns!"

Exhibiting the art of smiling while extremely angry, Tsuduri's cigarette touched my hand!

Th-this is too weird. Although it was only for a moment, and I didn't get burned, but as a teacher she's burning her students...

Damn it. Why does she know everything?

"Then? What do you mean by 'being her bodyguard'?"

Aria, faced by the short, black-haired Tsuduri, stood up, unafraid.

"Exactly what I said. I volunteer to be Shirayuki's bodyguard, and 24-hour duty as well!"

"Ah, hey Aria..."

Wh-why did you declare yourself to be Shirayuki's bodyguard?

You were attacked by Shirayuki, after all.

I tried to ask her through my eyes, but Aria seemed to be set on doing it.

"...Hotogi. I'm not sure why, but an S rank Butei has volunteered to be your bodyguard, you know?"

Seeing Tsuduri's jet black coat turn towards herself, Shirayuki--

"I...don't want her! Staying together with Aria all the time, that's horrible!"

The eyebrows under her fringe shot up, exhibiting the reaction I had predicted.

"--if you don't let me be your bodyguard, I'll shoot him!"

Whoosh!

Aria suddenly reached beneath her red skirt and drew her silver M911, aiming at my temple.

Hey, hey! Butei Law article 9! Article 9!

Butei can't kill people, Aria-sama!

"Kin...Kin-chan!"

Ah! Shirayuki covered her mouth with both hands in shock.

And just like I thought--on Aria's face was an evil smirk.

"Uu~...so that's how it is! That's what you're going to do-. Well? Hotogi? What are you going to do?"

Tsuduri seemed to be having a lot of fun, smiling while observing the situation.

Should you really be doing this?

At least remove the gun from my head...

"I-I-I have a condition!"

Shirayuki's hands hung downwards, powerless, her tear-filled eyes closed. She yelled,

"Kin-chan has to be my bodyguard too! And on 24-hour duty as well!"

From inside me...

Hyyu.

Something carrying my soul suddenly flew out of my listless body.

3rd Ammo: Caged Bird

For a Butei, being a bodyguard is one of the most common types of work.

The people that Butei normally protect are government officials, famous people, or VIP company officials who need themselves or their children protected. Sometimes though, people who are targeted by other Butei request protection.

So, this kind of work usually involves staying at the client's home, however...the client this time, in other words Shirayuki, really wants to stay in my room.

I was extremely reluctant to live in a place full of chances to go into Hysteria Mode like a girl's dormitory anyway, so this might be a good thing, but...

Wanting to move in on the second day of my commission, what is she thinking?

"Muto-kun, are you sure I can ride for free...? At least let me pay for the gas..."

"Don't worry about it! That is only a trivial thing, you know!"

Muto-kun, who for some reason was using such polite language for somebody in the same grade, jumped off the Logi department van that Shirayuki was sitting in, and using movements so quick that they would make people watching nauseous, he started offloading all the luggage.

...Was Muto-kun always so hard-working?

"About that..this place, if I remember correctly, isn't this the 3rd all-boys dormitory?"

"Ah...yeah."

"Are you trying to convert one of the empty rooms into a warehouse...or something? If that's the case, when you're returning to the girl's dormitory, please come find me! What I mean is... after this, if you want to do something like going out to get something to eat, or maybe for tea..."

"Ah, Kin-chan!"

Seeing me walking out of the dormitory lobby, Shirayuki's troubled face turned into a bright smile.

Muto-kun, who seemed like he was about to say something else, looked at Shirayuki, then at me, and back at Shirayuki, all the while a great question mark emerging above his head.

"Kin-ch....Tohyama?"

"Ah, about that, Muto-kun. From today onwards, I am staying at Kin-chan...Tohyama-kun's room."

"Kin...Kinji's place?"

"Don't misunderstand, this is work. I'm Shirayuki's bodyguard for now. This is all Aria's idea anyway, so don't start spreading rumors about this, got it?"

After listening to my explanation, Muto opened his mouth wide...but couldn't find anything to say.

...What kind of reaction is that?

Right now, I'm the one that doesn't have anything to say.

After all, I'm living with these two demonic girls, who could explode and cause massive destruction at any moment.

Returning to my house, which now seems like the remnants of a battlefield, I stumbled upon Aria installing something inside the room.

Looking closer, I realized that she was installing some infrared surveillance devices that she had bought from the commissary.

"What are you doing?"

"Can't you see? I'm turning this room into a fortress."

"You can't just do what you want!"

"Why're you so surprised, you're a Butei right? This kind of preparation is the basics of fundamental protection, right? We have to install surveillance devices all over this room; that way, when the enemy approaches our client, we will notice him immediately. Thankfully, there are a lot of broken places around the room, so it's easy to find a place to install these."

"You're the one who broke them..."

"Alright, next up is the skylight."

Ignoring my protests, Aria stretched out her hand to place the device onto the window. However, the mere 1.42 meter body obviously couldn't do it. Groaning, Aria started jumping up and down in an attempt to reach the window. However, she knocked off some of the metal pots hanging above, and they fell heavily onto her head. Serves her right.

At that moment, from the main entrance——

"E-excuse me....."

Shirayuki came in nervously. After putting away the standard issue Butei High shoes, with her long black hair that seemed to form a scarf around her neck, she bowed a deep 90 degrees towards me.

"Af-after this, I will be in your care. My name is Hotogi Shirayuki."

I already know...

"I-I'm still very inexperienced, so please take care of me!"

"Uh...I've known you for a long time already, what're you so nervous for?"

"Ah... once...once I think about entering Kin...Kin-chan's room then, I...I suddenly become really nervous..."

Aha, Shirayuki flashes an embarrassed smile.

Nervous?

Didn't you barge in here brandishing a Japanese sword around two days ago?

"About that, since I just moved in, why don't you let me clean up the house? After all, I was the one who destroyed this place."

Says Shirayuki, striding in...

Glare

And glared at Aria who's installing an anti-theft probe in the kitchen window.

"Kufufu. Plus, there is disposable trash that needs to be disposed of too, you know."

Wearing the same smile as ever, Shirayuki turned her head, and said those words with a voice like silver bells.

...No comment.

But that reminds me...

"...Shirayuki, just no more of the piano wire, okay?"

I still remembered the death trap in the wardrobe that Aria mentioned, so I quickly warned Shirayuki.

Although, when I had finished talking, her big eyes, with those long eyelashes, opened wide.

"Piano wire? What are you talking about, Kin-chan?"

...So she's going to act stupid.

But whatever, I don't want to get involved with their personal war.

I value my own life, after all.

She's completely different from a spoiled rich girl who grew up completely devoid of any need to do household chores, Shirayuki's skill in household chores is on a divine level.

She threw all the garbage out of the room that I didn't think was possible to clean, she used a vacuum to clean up what was left, and then she used putty to fill in the bullet holes in the walls and floor, while also changing the carpet.....within a mere 3 hours, she made the room look as good as new.

Lastly, she also put a greenhouse grown Japanese Dianthus in a vase, and placed it in the room.

"...Awesome..."

I watched in amazement, as I placed the Paulownia wardrobe that Shirayuki brought over next to the wall.

When I wanted to help her clean up, Shirayuki immediately said "I can't let Kin-chan do something like this!" and took my only job away, so the only thing I can do is menial labor like this.

...Just that moment.

Seeing Shirayuki entering the kitchen, Aria quickly darted over to my side.

"Kinji. You have to investigate that wardrobe properly, got it? It could be something dangerous."

"Dangerous? This is Shirayuki's personal property, you know."

"But somebody could have put something onto it while it was being moved, right?"

"You know...this, this is called paranoia."

"Butei Charter 7. 「Be ready with pessimism. Act with optimism」. I'm going to the balcony to set up a tripwire now, so I won't be able to do it myself. However, if you don't investigate for me, I'll make sure to make a hole in you later."

"...Alright, alright."

"Only say 'Alright' once!"

My pathetic struggle sent Aria fuming to the balcony along with her mobile toolbox...

But still, against my will, I roughly investigated the surroundings of the wardrobe.

...Of course, there's no way it could be holding something dangerous.

Click, when I opened the drawer, I saw various cosmetics inside.

I opened another one--

"...?"

Inside, there was a lot of mysterious cloth.

Each piece of cloth was stacked on top of each other neatly, like bamboo steamers for Dim Sum. Each one also had a little bow.

"...?"

The cloth inside was separated by white wooden tags with [Normal] and [Victory] written on them, [Normal] was a brilliant white, while [Victory] was a deep black.

[Victory]?

So you mean, this is some sort of equipment?

With that thought in mind, I reached inside to pick up a piece of the suspicious cloth.

From the luster of it, the black cloth was 100% silk, and it was as fine as string.

On the widest part of the triangle shaped cloth, the edge was embroidered with beautiful wavy lace flowers.

I lightly opened up the cloth that was so thin that one could almost see through it...

[-----!]

Bang!

I hurriedly returned the black cloth into the wardrobe, and slammed the drawer shut.

Dangerous...

Looks like there really was something dangerous.

Because the cloth inside the drawer, seemed as if, it was...it was all.....underwear!

And I'm afraid that that was--something that my brother taught me about when he was alive-- A G-string. Along with high shorts, it falls under the category of sexy underwear!

Tha...that girl, Shirayuki.

She normally acts so dignified and refined...but secretly, she was wearing this sort of underwear?

Now that I think about it, when I was aiming at her chest, she was wearing something like this...

This...This isn't good.

You have to calm down, Kinji.

If I go into Hysteria mode now...then wouldn't I act like a pervert!?

"Ah..Kin-chan, sorry. You had to bring the wardrobe up for me. This is my part of the luggage, you know..."

Hearing the sound coming from my back, I spun around furiously.

Unbeknown to me, Shirayuki had approached me some time before. Shirayuki was taking off her white gloves excitedly, it seemed as if she was putting on a flower-patterned lacy apron to go cook right after she had finished cleaning.

"Ah, this, no, no problem. At least let me help you do some menial tasks."

"Thank you, Kin-chan... You're pretty strong, Kin-chan. As expected of a boy."

Narrowing her eyes with joy, it appeared as if Shirayuki hadn't noticed my previous behavior.

Although, this apron and skirt----

The perfect feminine curve on her waist was so alluring, I had no choice but to stare at it.

This was different from the undeveloped Aria, Shirayuki's divine physical features are famed among the students.

According to people from the senior class who peeked at her during swimming lessons, the sight of Shirayuki in a swimming suit rivaled the appearance of magazine models.

This, this isn't good.

I nearly imagined Shirayuki wearing [Victory] in front of me, right now.

If I had fantasized about that, even if she's my childhood friend, I would be finished.

Thinking about this, I immediately--

"...Ah...about that, Aria will be guarding you for a while. I need to go out."

"Huh, where are you going?"

"I-I'm just going out. It doesn't matter where."

"Ah...right. I'm being so inquisitive, I'm sorry."

Listening to the words of the person who wanted to escape from this place quickly, Shirayuki quickly apologized.

Ah, thank God she's so gentle. If only she was like this all the time.

Because I had nowhere else to go, I went to the only family restaurant in Academy Island, Roxi to pass the time.

While I was listening to the song Aru=Kata, that would be used for the Adseard closing ceremony on my cellphone...

A fist came out of nowhere and smacked me on the head.

I took off my earphones and looked up, only to see Aria towering over me.

"What the hell are you doing here, Kinji!"

"I...have a reason for this. Rather than that, why did you come out?"

"I'm busy catching a deserter. That's my reason!"

Chink, Aria took out a pair of handcuffs from under her skirt.

Latin incantations are carefully engraved on the surface of the silver handcuffs; they're for special use against ability users.

When we were in the commissary, I remembered it because of the extremely high price. However, she went ahead and bought this kind of thing as well?

"I'm a deserter? What about your own guarding job?"

"I let Reki handle it."

"Reki?"

"I entrusted it to her. She will be standing guard from a distant building."

Thud, Aria sat herself down on the opposite side of the table.

Reki.

Her real name is unclear.

This point by itself is weird enough, but not only that, she doesn't speak, and she has no emotion or expression. That robot-like girl missing those

three things----she was the member of Snipe that we solved the bus-jacking incident with.

She's a genius that was ranked at S-level during her first year, but she also spent a whole day exercising on top of the school roof, and she always wears those large headphones, listening to I don't know what. She's a girl that is even harder to understand than Aria.

...So Aria involved Reki as well.

Letting her be a bodyguard... my brain is filled with the image of a cross-hair constantly aiming at Shirayuki.

"However, we're paying her for her time. After all, she's been chosen as the representative of Snipe for Japan at Adseard, so she's very busy. So we can only engage her services for a short time. Anyways, it won't do if you and I don't protect Shirayuki properly. Hey, Hey-! Are-you-listening-to-me?"

"Do-don't pull my ear! I was just thinking about Reki, of course I was listening. Also...there shouldn't be anyone that wants to hurt Shirayuki. Don't go randomly hiring people."

"Be more serious, Kinji! This is a real mission."

"Why did you suddenly want to be Shirayuki's bodyguard, anyways?"

In my anger, I blurted out the question that I had been thinking about since yesterday, and Aria----

Pata. PataPatata. Patata.

started to blink each eye separately.

--It's a flash signal.

Flash signal code is a signaling system used when Butei need to communicate with each other without disclosing information to others.

It's decoded in the same manner as Morse code.....

--Dyurandaru no Toukyu Kiken

Durandal is, eavesdropping, danger?

What does that mean?

Aria beckoned towards me lightly. I discreetly leaned towards her bringing my ear closer--until I reached the point where I could feel her breath on my ear. She started talking discreetly.

Damn it...I didn't think that even her breath would have that bittersweet smell. It smells really good.

"Durandal is one of the enemies that framed my mother. You remember the skilled swordsman that I was talking about in the morning? There's a very high chance that it's this guy. If we can successfully capture him, my mother's sentence would probably be reduced to 635 years. If all goes well, we might even be able to get the Supreme Court to withdraw the charges."

Ah.

So that's how it is...ah.

So that's the reason for this?

So that's why she seemed to turn into a different person, when she heard the name Durandal during class.

Scarcely after I understood--

My cell phone started ringing, as if someone was really eavesdropping.

"?"

I looked at the phone with the lion-leopard phone strap--

So, it was Shirayuki after all.

"...Hello."

"Kin-chan. Dinner will be ready soon. I tried making Chinese food today."

"Is that so? I got it, I'll be right back."

"Un. I'll wait for you. But if you're with a friend, it's fine if you come back a little later."

"Ah-..."

I'm afraid that if I tell her that I'm with Aria right now, then she'll get upset.

"No, I'm alone. I'll be right back."

"Hey, I'm here as well."

"Kin.....Kin-chan? Just now, was that Aria's voice?"

Kuh.

Aria is so insensitive.

"Ah, Aria just passed by."

"What are you talking about? I was talking with you just now... Are you an idiot?"

"Kin-chan."

Following the wake of Shirayuki's scary voice...

-Chop-

Came the sound of a kitchen knife slicing up white radish.

"--Why are you lying to me?"

Thi-this voice makes me feel like I'm watching a horror movie!

"Ah-All right, all right! I'll head back immediately!"

I shut my cell phone with a clicking noise and viciously pulled on one of Aria's twin braids.

My anger was slightly curbed from hearing Aria emit such a feminine scream.

But well, just a few seconds later, she brought her heel down on my head in retaliation.

When we got back, the table was already completely covered with Chinese food.

There was prawn fried rice, fried shrimp, sweet and sour pork, dumplings and mini noodles with abalone oyster sauce. Judging by the quantity, this was already a feast, but not only that, these were all my favorite dishes too.

Shirayuki brought out Jasmine tea on a tray. She was still wearing her uniform and that apron, daintily standing by my side at the table. Once she

saw me turn around, whether by intuition or something else, she neatly said,

"Please eat, Kin-chan. I made this all for you, you know."

Looking at her expression, which begged me to eat, I picked up a piece of sweet and sour pork... mmm. This is really good. Crispy yet not greasy. Also, this mild mellow taste that seems to envelope the tongue goes extremely well with the sweet vinegar.

Shirayuki is really an expert when it comes to cooking.

As for Aria, she wanted to make fried egg rolls earlier, yet only managed to make the eggs into some sort of paste and in the end, she couldn't make anything at all. The difference in skill between them is like the distance between the ground and the sky. No, it's more like the distance between the stratosphere and the bottom of the Japan Trench.

"Is..is it good?"

"It's delicious."

Even though it was that kind of a generic answer, Shirayuki covered the bottom part of her face out of joy and embarrassment.

And she also seemed to be fantasizing about something, as she murmured "...I'm very happy, my husband..." I wonder who she's talking about?

Anyways...

Although the food is delicious, with somebody watching me eat like this, I can't really eat properly.

"Come on Shirayuki, why don't you eat as well? You don't have to worry about me all the time, you know."

"Tha-that's...because you...are...Kin-chan."

What kind of answer is that?"

"...Alright then."

Shirayuki says while sitting down, with an embarrassed smile.

Sitting next to her...Aria was crossing her arms, with her temples twitching.

"Hey, why don't I have any food?"

"This is for you."

Thud.

Shirayuki's voice dropped to absolute zero, as she placed a bowl of rice in front of Aria.

Stuck inside the bowl was a pair of chopsticks which hadn't even been separated yet.

"What is this supposed to mean!"

"If you have something to say, then I guess I'll relieve you of being my bodyguard."

Aria started grinding her teeth and glaring at Shirayuki, who turned away with a huff.

In the end, she gingerly picked up the rice.

Aria and I were butting heads over what to do. I wanted to go to the theater to watch a foreign movie, but she wanted to watch some 2 hour animal space fantasy special. While we were doing so...

Shirayuki came into the living room holding what seemed to be a deck of cards.

"Kin-chan, these...these are Miko divination cards..."

"Miko divi...divination cards?"

"Yeah, Kin-chan seems to be curious about the future, so why don't you let me divine it for you?"

"Ah~...Then, let's try it out."

Her predictions seemed to be quite accurate.

Biologically, Aria is a girl as well, so she seemed to be quite interested in the divination as well. "What are you guys doing?" she said while setting up the HDD Recorder to record the animal show. After she had finished, she also scurried up to us.

...If you could record it in the first place, why did you feel the need to fight with me?

"Kin-chan, what would you like me to divine? Do you want me to predict your future romance, your wealth, your future romance, your health, or even your future romance?"

"...Can you predict what's going to happen many years later, maybe whether I go to a university or an office job?"

After hearing my request, Shirayuki appeared to sigh for just a moment, but immediately flashed an angelic smile, and answering 'yes', she began to place the cards in a star formation, turning over a few of the cards.

...Will I ever achieve a normal life?

Will I be able to transfer to a normal high school, and work for a normal office or a normal civil servant?

With this thought in mind, I was willing to even use divination as a mean to get an answer.

"So? What do you see?"

Hearing Aria's question, Shirayuki's eyes seemed like...they were dimming.

"What is it?"

"Ku, ah...nothing. As far as I can see, you will be blessed. That's great, Kinji."

"Hey, is that it? Can't you divine anything more solid?"

"A-ah well, you'll marry a black haired girl...just kidding."

Looking at Shirayuki's expression, her happiness seemed rather artificial.

What is it?

What did she find out? I'm really curious now.

"Then it's my turn next!"

Aria lost her patience, and stretched out onto the desk, so with those movements, my divination session was thoroughly over.

"It's all right if I don't tell you my date of birth, right? I'm a Virgo."

"Ah~, how unexpected."

Those words nearly sent Aria in a rage, but she held it in and neatly sat at the table, waiting for a result.

Shirayuki picked up the cards unwillingly, and flipped some of the cards over.

"If I could describe your fate in one word, it would be [Meaningless]."

Superficial----that was the mood Shirayuki gave off, and with that sentence she packed up her cards.

She obviously didn't bother to do it properly.

"Wait! Do it for me properly! You're a Miko, right!"

"So you don't trust my prediction...! I can't forgive you for that!"

"Do-you-want-to-fight!?"

Crackle crackle crackle

I could feel the killing intent as they locked eyes.

Thi-this isn't good.

"Well, since you want to fight so badly Aria, I will oblige you. Although I am unable to use the Hotogi secret arts, I still have a trump card."

Seeing that Shirayuki was looking down on her from under her fringe, Aria immediately stood up.

"I also have a trump card... Ku, not only one, I have two!"

"I have three."

"Then I have four!"

"Five."

"Infinite!"

"Shut up already! Why can't you guys even keep the peace over divination!"

Sure enough, pacifism should be the attitude adopted by everyone.

I intervened before the situation escalated to one where I wouldn't be able to do anything, and pulled them apart.

"Ku!"

Aria pulled down her eyelids to make a face, stuck out her tongue, and with a few 'Hmphs', slammed the door to her room.

Afterwards, from the *ZiZiZiZiZi* noise, she appeared to have started checking the house for any suspicious electronic activity using the wireless device that she had borrowed from Connect.

I, who was left behind, scratched my head...and turned to face Shirayuki.

Shirayuki, with a 'Fu', relaxed.

"...Although I don't wish to speak ill of others."

She continued to pack up her cards-

"Aria is a very cute girl, but she is way too noisy. Besides that, she doesn't understand Kin-chan at all. She was acting so rudely towards Kin-chan just now...the boys may think that Aria is cute, but I...hate her."

-While saying all this.

.....This was the first time I had ever heard Shirayuki speak ill of others.

Shirayuki looked up at me.

So...she seems to want me to criticize Aria as well.

"Aria, eh?"

Actually, I----

Noticed something, between Aria and Shirayuki.

I'm not sure whether I should mention it, but I should at least investigate a little.

"Do you really...hate Aria?"

"--Huh?"

"Um...how do I say this. Don't you understand Aria pretty well? It's hard to believe that you two have only been with each other for a short time. Also..although I may be wrong...but I think, you've never expressed yourself like this before."

"....."

"I think, the Shirayuki that Aria sees, is much closer to the real you than the one you show to everybody else... Of course, I don't wish for you two to fight, but the fact that you argue so much means that you two share some common sides, right?"

By principle, Shirayuki has always been a very obedient girl.

Because the world has always viewed such people as good.

So everybody thinks very highly of Shirayuki. Those teachers that don't know that she is an armed Miko, will of course like her, and even among the students, everybody depends on her.

But this meek personality has its flaws.

At least, that's what I think.

As a result, that kind of personality leaves no room for what Shirayuki truly thinks.

However, when Shirayuki is provoking Aria, that is when I really feel her true personality surfacing.

"...Kin-chan, you..."

After a brief silence, Shirayuki softly said that, lowering her head.

Under her fringe, those eyes with long eyelashes were also closed.

"You really understand the real me."

"...About that...well, we grew up together after all. Although I say that, some parts are a blank."

"I think that you understand me more than I understand myself."

Shirayuki's voice was very gentle...and she slowly started to move...

Looking at me...she approached as if nothing had happened.

"Aria...she rudely intruded on Kin-chan's and my world. Just like a bullet."

Did such a world ever exist?

"Not only that, she dared face me while I was using full power, and still she refused to back down one step. It's just as you say Kin-chan, although I wholly hate her, but in some ways, I do think...she's an amazing girl."

Woah.....

As I thought, Shirayuki doesn't just hate Aria, she also harbors some other complex feelings towards her.

"But, precisely because of that...I won't allow her to steal Kin-chan away. Because...she is so lovely."

"...This has nothing to do with stealing me away. Didn't I tell you that Aria and I are only a Butei squadron? Once we finish the task we agreed upon, we will say farewell. This isn't like you used to be, ever since you were my childhood friend."

"Childhood friend--I am your childhood friend."

Her frowning face suddenly shone again. I'm not sure what kind of special techniques she used while sitting, but she had moved to my side soundlessly.

Hey, hey, our shoulders are going to touch! No, they're already touching!

"Kin-chan has always understood me since a long, long time ago. Ever since the time when I was still prohibited to leave the Hotogi shrine, I remember all the kind things you had done for me... For that, I feel very fortunate."

Saying these things as if in a trance, Shirayuki subtly tilted her head towards me.

That soft, silky hair lay lightly on my arm.

Also, it emitted a mild ebony fragrance.

"Ah--...Now that I think about it, there was a time like that."

When I was around 4 or 5 years old, I stayed in a forest for a while because of my brother's job.

And on the outskirts of that forest, I got to know Shirayuki.

At that time, because of some reason, Shirayuki was forbidden from leaving the Hotogi shrine, and she obediently followed that law.

Because of that, she became extremely afraid of strangers, and when she first met me she was really scared. However, we soon warmed up to each other, and she let me join in the games of all the other little Hotogi Miko.

"And when I was able to see the fireworks with Kin-chan...I was so happy..."

Shirayuki, who had finally managed to rest her head onto my shoulder, continued to reminisce.

"At that time, Kin-chan got so excited because the fireworks in the city were so big...and he brought me out of the shrine to see the fireworks with him. That was the first time I had ever left the shrine since I became self-aware."

"Ah-...that. I didn't think you would remember that kind of thing so clearly."

I remember...after that, we were severely reprimanded by the adults, and Shirayuki was sealed inside a storehouse.

"Although you were punished so severely, you still came to Hotogi to play with me."

"It's because of my brother's work that I went there, you know. There were no other kids my age around there."

What did we play back then again? I remember that when I suggested football, all the other Miko firmly declined, and so we would do things like playing house, origami, or '**Kagome Kagome**'.

Kagome kagome, the bird in the cage.

I still remember that childish chant.

And also brother, who nicknamed Shirayuki and the other Mikos 'Caged Birds' out of pity.

I'm sitting at the end of the Adseard preparatory committee, daydreaming about Aria.

Recently she's been working hard to gather information about Durandal, and she's been running around everywhere. If there's any sort of disturbance at night, she will immediately jump up and draw her twin-guns, while looking around everywhere. Though, because she couldn't even

detect the presence of any enemies, and due to the pressure of living with Shirayuki like an in-law, she would always get into a bad mood.

"Hotogi-chan, you're going to participate, right? At least join the closing ceremony's Aru=Kata."

"Yeah. We already reserved a spot for you too."

Butei High is a high school after all, so it has a student council.

Although as per school rules, all the positions in the student council are held by girls.

The reason is that there was a time when the student council was made up of boys. In the end, there was a war over the student council finances. There's no hope for this school.

As a result, the Adseard Preparatory Committee is made up entirely from people from the student council.

Why would I come to this boring and dangerous---All of them are girls---meeting, you ask? Of course it's because Aria ordered me to guard Shirayuki.

"Hotogi-chan is so pretty, you'll definitely make a good impression on the media."

"That's right. It will definitely increase the prestige of Butei High. No, of all Butei!"

"Also, you're the person who came up with the choreography... So you wouldn't have any trouble performing Aru=Kata, right?"

Hearing what these girls were saying, I looked up at Shirayuki.

"Ah, but...please just let me work backstage."

Shirayuki caught my eyes, which were trying to convey the message:

"Wrap things up, you've already taken care of the main things, everything after this is just a formality."

I'm not sure if it was telepathy but,

"--I don't have much time left, so this should be all."

Shirayuki announced to the class in a clear voice.

At these moments Shirayuki's voice is really melodious, and it really gives a feeling of reliability.

If Aria was a Seiyuu, then Shirayuki would be a female announcer.

While I was thinking about these things idly, I yawned and stood up.

...Even though the meeting had just ended, all the girls had started being noisy again.

"--Hey, want to go to Odaiba after this?"

"Ah, good idea!"

"I'll go too! I heard that Marui was newly renovated."

"Great! I was thinking of getting a new summer miniskirt!"

"Once you mentioned Odaiba I remembered something! Estella's sugar pine is going on offer today!"

"Haha, the only thing more important than attractiveness for you is appetite! As expected of a Butei who has no relation with men!"

Ahaha, exactly!

Although,

they're all wearing such innocent and cute smiles...

I really can't stand this kind of thing.

The reason you girls have no relationships with men is that under your skirts, you carry guns...

That's right, I noticed.

"Hotogi-chan, why don't you come with us? Want to come browse the new summer designs?"

Shirayuki, who was invited by a first year, looked blankly at her.

"Ah well, I have to go home, I still have some SSR work to do, and I have to make the guidebook for Adseard..."

Hearing what Shirayuki said, the girls hung their heads and-

"As expected of the President. She's so hardworking..."

"Hotogi-chan really doesn't know what it means to be tired."

"She's like a superwoman..."

-Complimented Shirayuki. They weren't being sarcastic at all, and they spoke out of real respect for Shirayuki.

But--

At the same time, I felt that there was an uncrossable chasm between Shirayuki and them.

Shirayuki and I walked home in the sunset--

The committee was extremely close to the boy's dormitory, so we went there and back on foot.

...Although I normally don't like to walk home with girls, this time is an exception. After all, I am her bodyguard, so I can't really do anything about it. Also, if Aria were to hear that I let Shirayuki walk home by herself, she'd definitely pepper my body with holes.

"I-I was really nervous today, with Kin-chan watching me the whole time. How...did I do?"

Shirayuki, who was holding her bag in front of her with both hands, seemed very embarrassed.

However, her expression seemed to show that in her heart she was really happy that we could walk home together.

"I think that everyone really trusts you, isn't that good?"

Hearing my indirect answer, Shirayuki's face blushed a color reminiscent of a scarlet Hakama, and dipped her head.

"...I-I was...pra-praised by...Kin-chan..."

She said to herself.

Hey, you should look forward when walking.

Look, you just walked into a telephone pole.

"Anyways, aren't you going to be one of the performers for Aru=Kata? Everyone wants you to, you know."

"I-I can't. How could I? Being a performer...the role should go to a more cute and lively girl. An unremarkable girl like me would only stain Butei High's reputation."

"You...shouldn't look down on yourself like this, you know. It's a bad habit. You just need to pretend to be lively while on stage, right? You might even become really happy while you're on stage, you know. Just trust in yourself, and let everybody see the real you."

"But..."

"Could it be that--you're afraid of Durandal? That kind of thing doesn't exist. You won't be attacked by it."

"Yeah...I got it. Durandal...doesn't exist...but I still can't do it."

"Why?"

"The Hotogi will get angry."

The Hotogi.

What Shirayuki means is the Hotogi shrine--

Which is also her clan.

"Why would they get angry over this kind of thing?"

I've heard her make this excuse several times, so I have an inkling of an idea...

The Hotogi shrine places several restrictions on Shirayuki in return for letting her attend a Tokyo high school.

They say that these measures are put into place to help preserve etiquette, but in truth, it's really just a set of annoying restrictions.

"I--can't show myself in front of too many people,"

Shirayuki said stubbornly.

She didn't give a reason, and she just continued to refuse.

From her reaction, it looks like it's impossible to get her to perform.

".....when that first year at the committee invited you to Odaiba, did you also refuse because of the Hotogi?"

"Yes."

"Hey now..."

"If--I don't have permission, I'm not allowed to leave the shrine or the school."

Hey...what is this.

Even if it's your clan, they can't forbid you to go out, right?

This is way over the top...to the point of violating human rights.

While I was about to say so, I noticed something about Shirayuki--

"The Hotogi Mikos are armed Mikos. From the time we are born to the time we die, our body and soul belongs to the Hotogi,"

she said simply, as if talking to herself.

"The reason for the existence of our generation...is to be Mikos for the Hotogi. This has been set in stone. Of course, if we are needed, we will go to other shrines, and we will also receive modern education...but only the lowest level. The Hotogi were firmly opposed to something as simple as going to Butei High..."

"But haven't you already left? There's no need to observe those old customs anymore. You've already entered high school, how can you just accept their reprimands like a good little girl?"

"....."

"It's fine if you don't make dinner for us tonight. You should meet up with the girls at Odaiba."

"It-it's fine. Also...I've always thought that...it was very scary outside."

Shirayuki's line of sight dropped down.

"Scary? Marui? Isn't that just a normal clothing store?"

"But I...throughout elementary and middle school, I only went to Miko academy."

Miko academy.

It's a sort of theological college, an all-girls boarding school that affluent Miko go to.

"So I haven't...ever gone out to shop, or even gone out to eat. I...don't have the confidence to go out with everybody in public."

"...Confidence?"

"They know things that I have no idea about. If it isn't school related, there's no way I could participate in the conversation. Snacks, Karaoke, TV Series...I don't know anything about what's popular. They...won't understand."

"Shirayuki..."

"But it's OK, since I have Kin-chan by my side. Kin-chan is the only one who can understand me. You're the only one that can fully accept the real me, just like back then. So that's all I need. I'm satisfied with this."

Shirayuki...

Shirayuki.

You.

Aren't you...exactly like back then?

You've already left the Hotogi so far behind--and yet, you still,

Are just a...caged bird.

That night, I took a shower and dried myself, then put on my pants and turned off the light.

I left my shirt off...and glanced at my watch.

It was already 10:00PM.

It seems as if Aria hadn't returned yet. She left a note in the afternoon saying that she was going to Lezzad, I guess she was still looking for news about Durandal.

Even though I no longer needed to do any morning exercise because of my duty as Shirayuki's bodyguard, Aria announced "From now on, I'm going to sneak attack you as training," and she would really launch a surprise attack from time to time.

I was still unable to perfect Edge Catching, but I was being stubborn about it.

While I was thinking about this and drying my head--

patter patter patter

I heard soft, quick footsteps from the corridor.

For some reason, those footsteps sound panicked.

"?"

What's going on?

I automatically turned towards the curtains of the changing room--

"--Kin-chan! What's wrong!?"

rattle

The curtains of the changing room--opened completely!

And the person who opened it, was Shirayuki in her Miko outfit.

For some reason, she had a panicked expression, and her eyes were opened like big circles.

"Huh, huh!?"

...About this.

This situation.

Normally--actually, I have no idea what's normal anymore-- As a male and female, shouldn't our positions be switched?

"Wh-what's going on?"

"Uh, bu-but, Kin-chan you...ph-phone call."

"--phone call?"

"You to-told me to come immediately, and then it suddenly disconnected."

"I didn't call you!"

"It could have been Kin-chan, although it was a blank number--but you said 'I'm in the shower!'"

No way.

She's got to be imagining this.

"How could I shower and make a phone call at the same time! Why would I do something weird like that!"

"Bu-but, the ph-ph-pho--!"

It appeared that Shirayuki had only now realized that I was half naked, and her gaze traveled from my face, to my collarbone, to my chest, to my navel.....--the whole way down. However, her face seemed to be going pale from the bottom up, as if she had exceeded some sort of capacity limit, and with a "Fu" her face became flaming red.

Also, it seemed as if she was hyperventilating, because of her long, deep breaths.

"Go!"

Go?

"I'm sorry!!"

Ching!

And with an unimaginably strange jump, she bounded backwards at an oblique angle.

She seemed to adopt a stance in the middle of the air, as she flung out her hakama and sleeves, and she landed on the ground with a *Thud!* - kneeling.

"I-I-I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

She was curled up into a ball, and it seemed like steam was about to come out of her ears, seeing as how red her face was.

Stare, it seemed as if she had jerked her head up too furiously, and her eyes were swirling.

"Kin-chan was showering! So I imagined Kin-chan naked!, I wa-was practicing my Kidoujutsu^[4], and I completely forgot that you were in the shower, that's the truth!"

"I-I didn't ask you that!"

"But, once I imagined it, I started hyperventilating! Pl-please forgive me! Shirayuki is a bad girl! I was pretending to be good, but I'm actually a bad girl that fantasizes about things that she shouldn't! I'm a girl that has to put on 10 layers of cat skin!^[5]! But my heart is still so dirty.....@#%!"

This isn't good.

"Ah, hey..."

If I continue to let her rampage like this, the slightly abnormal Shirayuki will become really abnormal.

Thinking this way, I knelt on one knee in front of her.

"All right, all right. It's OK. It's just somebody getting the wrong number. There's no need to apologize like this."

Although I did that in an attempt to calm her down...

It appears that approaching her half naked was extremely stupid.

Shirayuki--*smack*

Subconsciously used her hands to cover her eyes.

...But it seemed as if she was peeking at my chest from between her fingers.....

And,

"It's a draw!"

She suddenly shouted randomly.

After Shirayuki removed her hands from her face, I saw that it was completely red, as if she had a fever.

But what's going on? It does feel like it's getting hotter. Are you a stove?

"A draw? What draw?"

Hearing my question...

Shirayuki exhibited the actions she would take when her brain short-circuits.

"If Kin-chan sees me change as well, it'll be fair!"

"Huh?"

Rustle! Her right hand already grasped hold of the collar of her white outfit.

Rustle! Her left hand pulled off the obi holding her hakama.

Shirayuki, as if she couldn't stand the feeling of her clothes any longer--began taking off all her Miko garments!

"Wa-wait wait wait! This isn't fair at all! Don't strip!"

I hurriedly said while tugging on her clothes.

"I have to strip, I have to strip, I have to strip--! It's OK! It's OK if it's Kin-chan-sama! I don't mind at all! So don't worry!"

Ho-how could I let you strip!

If I see [Victory] again, I'll definitely enter Hysteria Mode!

So I used all my strength to pull at her outfit and her hakama.

"Stop it, Kin-chan! Let go of me!"

Shirayuki said.

"Stop struggling!"

I said.

"I'm back-"

Aria said.

...

.....

.....Aria.....?

Oh. Crap.



Falling from the hands of Aria, who returned to this horrible situation of utmost despair, was a paper bag.

One Matsumoto peach bun, tumbled out of it,
and hit Shirayuki's white sock, while she was still entangled with me.

-Seeing the appearance of Aria, Shirayuki immediately screamed "Ahhhhh!" and fixed up the bottom part of her Miko garments.

--Her black eyes were teary, and all the clothes on her torso were in a mess.

---Added to this, I was still holding on to her clothes, with my upper body still naked.

----And the finishing touch was the words we spoke earlier. "Stop it, Kin-chan! Let go of me!" "Stop struggling!"

"...You...you you you you..."

rumble...rumble rumble rumble rumble, Aria's voice suddenly became the voice of a lion.

Click.

She thrust her dainty hands into the sides of her skirt.

"Stupid Kinji-----!!"

Bang Bang!!

Without any warning, the pitch black and silver-white M1911 fired .45ACP bullets!

"Woah?"

The bullets that were aimed besides my foot, suddenly ricocheted towards me.

Wait! Wait, wait!

I'm not wearing a bulletproof vest right now, I'm naked!

"---I-I-I leave you alone for a little while, and this is what happens? You, you! Obscene pervert! Die!"

Bang! Bang! Bang Bang! Bang!

Along with Aria's furious voice came bullets, continuously pounding into the ground by my feet.

"Wait! Wait a moment! Let me explain!"

I continued to dodge backwards, as Aria's bullets peppered the floor in front of me.

"You bastard! You-really-are-a be-beast! Insect! Germ!"

Bang! Bang! Bang Bang!

Aria's dual guns continually fired towards me, and hit the ground beneath my feet with a Thud! Thud! noise.

Finally, I was cornered on the balcony.

I-I can't escape anywhere anymore!

Behind me is Tokyo Bay!

"You, you-you-you, after molesting me, you go after Shirayuki!? You, you, you big pervert!"

Click Click! Aria's dual guns are finally pointed towards me.

Wh-what do I do, Kinji!?

Even if I hide in one of the cabinets, she'll definitely throw me out the window!

"Th-that isn't it, Aria! Don't deny it anymore!"

Hearing Shirayuki's strange words, Aria wrinkled her eyebrows and turned her head.

"De-deny what?"

Said Aria, showing her canines. Shirayuki answered,

"That wasn't Kin-chan assaulting me! We both consented!"

"Yo-you both what--?"

"That's right! I was the one who wanted to strip! So Kin-chan is not in the wrong!"

"Yo-you wanted to strip! Wh-wh-wh-what were you two doing!?"

With a "Heh!", Shirayuki snatched the guns from the confused Aria's grip.

Al-although what Shirayuki was saying was a little...but whatever, well done Shirayuki! Keep going!

"Bu-but--ev-ev-even if both of you consented, it still isn't OK!!"

Fu Fu Fu Breathing in and out, the blushing Aria charged into Shirayuki's arms, *Thud!*

Thud!

They both tumbled backwards to the floor.

"Ah!"

"Kinji! Tha-that's forbidden for a bodyguard!"

Aria shouted that while showing her canines, and leaped over Shirayuki to me.

"If-if you were just in a relationship, it would be OK! Bu-but doing this kind of thing with your client...you fail as a Butei! You fail! You completely fail--!"

Aria shouted in a voice shrill enough to break glass,

"I'm going to make some holes in you!"

Bang Bang Bang Bang Bang Bang!

The guns in her hands unfeelingly spit tongues of fire towards me!

"--!"

I jumped off the Boy's dormitory balcony, and used the cable in the obi to hang in the air like a spider.

I'm hanging from a thread of fate...literally.

I had just thought this when,

"Go cool down your hot head! I'm not throwing you a buoy!"

Bang! Snap!

The cable tying me to the balcony was snapped by a bullet from the screaming Aria, and I fell straight into the safety net. *bounce*

Splash!

When I came to, I had already dropped into the sloping Tokyo Bay.

Bodyguards--

Are not allowed to have a deep relationship with their clients.

This is the basic of the basics, and is even written down in the Assault textbooks.

The reason being that, if a bodyguard gets too comfortable with his/her client, he will be too relaxed, and in the case of an actual emergency, his decisions will be flawed.

However, this job was only taken because of the over-enthusiasm of the Masters, and is more like 'playing Bodyguard', rather than a real job.

But Aria, who got extremely agitated when she heard Durandal's name, made me take all this seriously, and even got angry when I didn't meet her expectations. It really is troublesome.

Therefore.

After the incident with Shirayuki after the shower, I, who was already tired, fell into Tokyo Bay, and...

I caught a cold.

And that morning, although Aria said "How useless," when she saw that I was so unsteady, with a thermometer stuck in my mouth...she didn't attack me like usual.

Shirayuki was extremely worried and wanted to take care of me, even if it meant that she had to skip school. However, I thought that there was no need to go to such extreme measures, and told her to go to school, for better or worse.

When they had all left, the only thing I could do was lie on my bed.

My temperature had already risen to nearly 38° Celsius (100.4° Fahrenheit)

Although at times I didn't feel too bad, right now I could hardly endure the pain.

It appears that increasing my temperature was my body's last defense against the viruses, and my consciousness slowly blurred.

I'm not sure how long I laid there...

It was probably around noon.

Somebody came inside.

It seemed as if they wanted to check my condition...so, it was probably Shirayuki.

I was so weary that I couldn't even muster the effort to make a sound, and so...I continued to lie down.

And on my burning forehead...

Someone's hand, as if checking my temperature...lay on it.

It was a very...gentle hand.

When I woke up, it was already 2:00 in the afternoon.

The thermometer showed that my temperature was still 38° Celsius (100.4° Fahrenheit), but it appeared that I had adapted slightly, as I was a lot more comfortable.

"....."

Alone in the room, I slowly sat up.

I was really thirsty. Probably because I had sweat a lot.

I stood up in search of water and I shakily...stumbled out of my bedroom, but when I wanted to close the door...hmm?

I suddenly felt some bags that had been hung up on the outside of the door.

"?"

I opened it cautiously, and noticed that inside was the Yamato Pharmaceutical's 'Special Pueraria Syrup'.

Wrapped inside some ancient packaging for me, whose body was largely unaffected by drugs, this particular cold medicine had an amazing effect.

--Shirayuki, huh?

She really does, understand me.

But, this medicine...I've told her before, right? Whatever, who cares.

As expected of the 'Special Pueraria Syrup'.

Because of its amazing effects, when I woke up again, my temperature had returned to normal.

It was already evening, and I was about to leave my bedroom, but I bumped into Shirayuki who had just come in.

"Ah, Kin-chan. Is your cold all right now?"

"Yeah. The fever has receded, and my head doesn't hurt anymore."

"That's great...that's great...*sniff*....Waaa..."

"Don't cry just because of a little thing like this."

"Yes."

Shirayuki wiped away her tears, and immediately flashed her bright smile again.

"...This is all because of the 'Special Pueraria Syrup' you bought. I drank some and slept, and now I'm fine again."

"Huh? I...thought that Kin-chan didn't like medicine, so I was going to make some medicinal food for you..."

"What? You're the one who bought that right? I'm sorry about that. That syrup can only be bought in some messy pharmacy deep in Ameyoko. It must have been scary for a girl to go there alone. Thanks for that."

"Huh...ah."

Shirayuki's snow white fingertips were covering her mouth...as if...she was thinking about something-

"...Uu...un"

-and with that, she fled from my sight.

In the Assault facilities, which seemed like a gymnasium, I was carrying an electric guitar that clashed with me completely.

Today was the rehearsal of the Adseard closing ceremony, so I, who was forced by Aria to join the Aru=Kata performance, was playing a borrowed DC59.

"I'd like to thank the person..." (This is in English.)

I wasn't the lead singer, I was just part of the chorus of performers.

I snuck into the Butei High affiliated Middle School, and had practiced a little there, plus the song was only around 2 minutes. Added to this, Shiranui was there, and his skills were excellent, so the rehearsal wasn't very difficult...but I still didn't feel comfortable. Surprisingly, the Assault facilities were being used for peaceful purposes, which was kind of sad.

Opposite of Muto, who wished to show off his skills on the drums, was Aria and the other girls with Pom Poms, practicing their cheerleading.

Pa Pa Pa *Pa Pa Pa*

Their short skirts fluttered along with their quick dance movements.

Damn it.

Why do they all have to wear this kind of thing? Even though Muto said that this was an annual chance to feast one's eyes, for me this was a terrifying sight.

Because if I'm not careful, I will definitely enter Hysteria Mode.

I'll just concentrate on my own hands then.

"Alright, this should be enough for today. Thanks for the hard work, everyone."

Shirayuki announced, just like a teacher, and the girls dispersed.

Although I was greatly relieved, I didn't want to hang around in a place full of the scent of women...so I immediately packed up my guitar, and climbed the stairs to the roof.

--The weather was nice and sunny.

The sunlight was really warm.

The weather really is amazing.

Thinking this way, I laid down on my back.

I deeply inhaled the fresh spring breeze.

Ahh...this is really comfortable.

...The wind in May really is the best.

While I was appreciating the Spring sun,

The wind seemed to take on a sweet smell, reminiscent of Gardenia.

"?"

I automatically opened my eyes and,

Smack!

My heaven became hell.

A white sneaker found its way onto my face.

"Huh!?"

Bang! Smack!

This time, that small sneaker wound up for a kick, but I managed to dodge by spinning my head.

Thud!

"Stop slacking off! Go protect Shirayuki, you piece of trash!"

With one foot thudding by my ear, Aria stood above me in her cheerleader outfit.

Her hands, holding Pom Poms, were at her waist, and she was really angry.

"Ar-Aria?"

I never thought that she'd chase me up here.

I looked at her in protest, and sat up--

"--Hmm?"

Woah.

Aria, very unlike her previous cheerleading movements, stretched her right foot all the way up, until it touched her head.

The sun's glare hid that foot in shadow.

--Hah, I understand.

She's using her feet to teach me Edge Catching!

Understanding this, I prepared myself to block her heel crush.

Thud!

But my hands only managed to clap together above Aria's calf...

That 21 centimeter foot continued on its inexorable path, and descended onto my head.

.....Thump.....

I fell down to the floor again.

I can't take this...Aria-sama, spare me.

Although I'm already used to being heel crushed from our sparring in Assault, but if I'm to fight back now I'd definitely be killed.

Next to me, Aria straightened out her own flat chest,

"How useless. Edge Catching...at least succeed once! I'm not here to play with you, you know!?"

Glare! She extended her canines while glaring at me.

"Th...that..."

I rubbed my head with one hand, and stood back up.

"...You, if you really want to be my partner, then please think about my condition as well. Would it be so bad to let me rest for a while? I just got better. And the reason for me getting sick in the first place was because some idiot pushed me into the cold, filthy, Tokyo Bay at night!"

Hearing my angry voice, Aria said,

"Th....I apologize for that. I myself think that I went way over the top....."

Those red eyes turned, and looked to one side.

That cute expression, it makes me...

instinctively want to help her.

"Well, let's not talk about my cold anymore. After all it became all better after Shirayuki gave me the 'Special Pueraria Syrup'."

"Huh?"

Hearing my words, Aria's head immediately snapped back into position, and her eyes were opened wide in surprise.

What's with that reaction?

What I said just now wasn't surprising at all, right?

"Th-that...I..."

She started muttering something, and I wrinkled my eyebrows and put on a '?' expression, as if asking her to clarify.

But Aria shut her mouth, and it seemed as if she would not utter another word.

"...What is it? Only that kind of medicine will have any effect on me. Didn't I tell you this before? I'm not sure Shirayuki knew about it, but she bought it for me."

With my rough explanation, Aria's...mouth opened,

"...Did Shirayuki tell you that?"

she asked me.

"Hm? Yeah."

"....."

.....

What's going on?

Why isn't she saying anything?

"Wh-whatever, as long as you're better. I'm nobility, I can tolerate this kind of thing."

"?"

What I said just now...what would it make Aria mad enough that she would need to hold it in?

I really don't understand this at all...

"A noble does not show off her efforts. Because that's extremely unsightly. Even if her efforts are taken by someone else."

"What's that supposed to mean? If you're going to explain, then explain more clearly. This isn't like you at all."

"What's that supposed to mean?! It has nothing to do with you! If I don't want to explain, then I won't!"

Bah!-Aria stuck her tongue out at me.

"It's great isn't it, having Shirayuki to take care of you! Shirayuki this, Shirayuki that, every time someone does something nice for you, it's Shirayuki! Why don't you just marry Shirayuki and be done with it!"

Aria gritted her canines, and blasted me above her normal 30% capacity voice.

Why is she so angry all of a sudden?

Although it's obviously something I said that made her so angry, I have no idea what it was.

"Ah, hey! Why are you so angry!"

"Shut up! I'm not angry!"

"Yes you are!"

"No, you're the one whose angry!"

Our faces, which were almost touching, locked eyes with a crackling noise.

But mostly because I was around 30 centimeters taller, it was more like she was glaring up at me, and I was dipping my head to glare at her.

Crackle Crackle Crackle Crackle

Aria, who refuses to explain why she's angry, really makes me angry as well!

It makes me remember everything she's done to anger me.

She reduced my home to ruins, brought Shirayuki over, and now she keeps on doing this sort of thing!

"Then let me use this opportunity to say something, I will stay with you as your partner--but, I'm never going to do Edge Catching training anymore! Only geniuses would know that sort of thing! It can't be that easy to learn!"

"No way! You have to continue! There's a rumor that Durandal carries a sword that can cut through anything! That way, even if you have a knife or a shield, it won't be of any use! So right now, learning how to Edge Catch is a must! If Shirayuki was attacked, then you'd realize--"

"If? I've been protecting Shirayuki these past few days, but there hasn't even been a sign of danger! Since we're already arguing like this, I'll say this directly! The enemy, Durandal, doesn't exist!"

Hearing my words, Aria opened her eyes wide.

"I know that you want to save your mother--Kanae-san immediately! But, you've already completely lost your cool! Just hearing that "Durandal" could appear is already enough to make you think "I hope that he appears." And without knowing it, you're deluding yourself into thinking that the "enemy" is here!"

"You're wrong!"

Glare! Aria pointed one Pom Pom at me while extending her canines!

"Durandal definitely exists! My senses tell me that he's already very near!"

"Those are delusions! Shirayuki is definitely not in danger, you can go do whatever you want! Before Adseard's closing ceremony finishes, you can let me be her bodyguard by myself!"

"What's that supposed to mean!? You're pissing me off!"

Under me, Aria's face became red and roared,

"You're right! I'm just an idiot after all, a paranoid! Despite that you two are a bodyguard and client! Ye-ye-yet, you still dare to strip each other....how shameless!"

"Tha....that also! It's only because you had your own preconceptions that you made the situation even worse! Just because you were born in a better family doesn't give you the right to think of me as a piece of trash! You may be a genius, but the world counts on ordinary people like me to turn! You're the one that's out of the ordinary!"

I shouted, enraged--

Aria, softly sobbed...she was more hurt by my words than I thought.

She...didn't retort.

Not only that...

She...backed away from me a step.

Two steps, Three steps.

And weakly, unlike the Aria I knew, she retreated.

"You're...also like that. You also say those sorts of things."

Aria, softly muttering those words, was trembling.

But that soft voice, was far stronger than her normal one--

--it was able to truly express, the rage she felt inside.

"Nobody understands me. They all say I'm a reckless, solitary, girl that only knows how to rush forward-- They said that I was unworthy of being in the house of Sherlock Holmes. I didn't think you were this way too!"

Aria lowered her face and said to me--no, those words weren't directed to anybody.

It was as if she was shouting this out to the whole world.

"I understand perfectly! The enemy is approaching Shirayuki! Bu-but, I can't explain it! I can't be like my ancestor, Sherlock Holmes, who was able to explain these situations so that anyone could understand! So nobody is willing to believe me--I've always been an [Aria]-- Bu-but, my instinct has never been wrong! I've already explained it so clearly, but why! Why won't you believe me!"

Aria, who's eyes were brimming with tears, threw her Pom Poms to the ground, and started wailing like a child.

...At times like this, I should say something gentle to comfort her, right?

But, I was already agitated from arguing with Aria,

and I was unused to being blunt with her.

So I said,

"...That's right, I don't understand! An enemy that doesn't exist is approaching! Who would believe that? Since you say that, why don't you show me some proof! If you're a Butei, then give me some proof! If you can't, then I'll say this as many as times as I need to! The enemy doesn't exist!"

And--

as if I wanted to hurt Aria again--

I uttered those words.

"You, you, idiot! Idiot Idiot Idiot Idiot Idiot----!!"

Since my reaction was completely unexpected, Aria flew into a true rage--

Her face became flushed with blood, and she drew her dual guns!

"Wa...!"

Without even letting me say 'Wait!',

Bang Bang Bang Bang Bang!

Countless bullets grazed me as they flew towards my body.

This sudden surprise attack left me only one choice, taking cover on the ground. *Thud!*

"Kinji you idiot! Idiocy gold medalist! You win a Nobel Prize for idiocy!"

Aria stamped her foot where she had stepped on my face just now, loaded her guns, fired in a random direction, and stormed back down the stairs.

Once again I was lying on the ground like a cross.....I felt that the water tank behind me was leaking, and looked back at it.

The water tank had multiple holes in it from the barrage just now...

Looking closer, I noticed that the bullet holes formed a straight line...no, they formed words-

'I d i o t K i n j i'

-those two words were written on the surface of the tank.

Hey.....

There's no way I'm going to be able to fix this...

But really, her marksmanship is amazing.

It's you that's the gold medalist, isn't it? If you entered Adseard, you'd definitely take home the gold medal for Marksmanship and Idiocy.

After that incident, I returned to my room...calmed down a bit...and decided that no matter what, when Aria came back I would apologize. With that, I waited for her return.

But, no matter how long I waited, she didn't come back.

She probably did as I said, and went off to do her own things.

When night fell, and she still hadn't returned, I explained the rough situation to Shirayuki--

"So, does that mean that Kin-chan will be my only bodyguard from now on?"

...It appears as if Shirayuki was extremely happy about that.

"Yeah. Well, probably."

I sat down on the newly-bought sofa, and took apart my Amdo-modified Beretta M92F so I could maintain it.

Aria isn't here anymore.

With that, even with this gun, I felt powerless.

"Before the Adseard closing ceremony, I will be your bodyguard. Although this task was just something that the Masters and Aria insisted I do, but...well, a promise is a promise."

Hearing me say 'promise', Shirayuki became excited.

"Kin-chan is...protecting me...promise..."

Seeing Shirayuki say that as if savoring the aftertaste, after which she dipped her head and said "I'm very happy...", I continued to say: "Don't you...feel uneasy? Having an E rank Butei like me protecting you... Well, although I don't think that Durandal exists, if he actually does exist, when he launches his attack--"

When Shirayuki heard me, who merely wished to confirm her words, she violently shook her head.

"I've never felt uneasy."

"..."

"Because I have Kin-chan by my side. Kin-chan is really strong. You won't lose to anyone. I have faith in you. So, Kin-chan, let me ask you again...please protect me."

"Ah...right."

Hearing Shirayuki use such polite language in what seemed to be a playful manner, I accepted by reflex.

But Shirayuki's voice was not playful at all, nor was it flattery, it was what she really felt from the bottom of her heart.

That's right. I was the one who got rid of the guys who were bullying Shirayuki, so ever since the day of the entrance exam, Shirayuki has always put 100% of her trust in me.

Although, the person she trusts isn't the normal me.

Rather, it is the me in Hysteria Mode.

If--

the one in a thousand chance,

that Durandal, really exists...

The one in a million chance,

if Lezzad and the S rank Buteis were right...and like Aria said, Shirayuki was targeted by him.

The one in a trillion chance,

that something actually happens.

Will I...be able to protect Shirayuki?

Am I able to answer her words of trust that allow her to be at ease?

...I probably won't be able to.

...But.....well, I don't need to worry.

These few days, I've been constantly taking note of everything that happens around Shirayuki, but there isn't even a trace of danger around her? There shouldn't be a problem, right? Yeah. There definitely won't be a problem.

I thought, placing my maintained Beretta onto the table.

"Ki-Kin-chan-sama."

As if she was waiting for me to finish my maintenance...Shirayuki used that strange name again, and slowly turned towards me.

"What is it?"

"Th-the obstacle during Golden Week... No, what I mean is...Aria won't be here during Golden Week either, right?"

"Yeah...she probably won't. Do you want to go somewhere?"

"N-no. I'll be taking it easy and studying at home,"

said Shirayuki, hurriedly waving her hands.

"...Isn't that just sitting at home? You're always studying, if you don't relax once in a while, won't you regret it? When you're older you might say something like 'Ahh, it would've been better had I played more when I was young'."

"Bu-but..."

Looking at Shirayuki's dejected expression, I remembered something,

"Is it because of the Hotogi?"

"..."

Shirayuki didn't deny it.

Unable to leave the shrine or the school, just like a...

Caged bird.

This thought appeared in my brain, and added to this, my irritation from having argued with Aria earlier, led me to stand up in anger.

And with a *thump*, I sat down in front of the computer.

Shirayuki, on whom I had turned my back, became agitated because of such a small thing.

"Ki-Kin-chan, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. But, I..."

Not knowing why I'm angry, she apologized to me by reflex.

But I didn't say anything to her, and continued to type away..looking for something on Tokyo Travel Guide--

Bing--

Hearing the printer rattle to life, Shirayuki started, but immediately went to retrieve what I had printed.

She reversed her direction, and walked back towards me.

"This is for....Kin-chan. What is this, all of a sudden?"

"This isn't for me. This is for you."

"?"

Shirayuki turned the paper towards herself in surprise.

"...May 5, Tokyo Disneyland Fireworks show...change into your kimonos and with the stars - enjoy the bright mirages...?"

After reading the contents, Shirayuki turned towards me with a face full of doubt.

"You should go."

"Ah!"

"Is this really so surprising?"

"I-I can't, in that kind of crowded place...I..."

"Don't worry. You don't need to go into Disneyland, you can see the fireworks from Kasai Rinkai Park. And it's only one day, just think of it as training so you can go outside."

Although training to be able to go outside is kind of weird, she's not normal in the first place, so this is unavoidable.

"Bu-but...I..."

I stood up, and with a *thud* I placed my hand onto Shirayuki's shoulder, who as I thought, was extremely reluctant.

"...I'll be your bodyguard, and come with you."

"Go...going out with Kin-chan...?"

"Yeah. After all, this is before Adseard's closing ceremony."

Saying this, I refused to let Shirayuki, who's eyes were shining for some reason, refuse.

Shirayuki--nodded.

That neat fringe shook, and rested back on her head.

4th Ammo: Man-made Beach

Ever since we fought at Assault, Aria hasn't appeared before me--

However, she went to Reki's dormitory, like I thought she would.

Therefore, I was going to tell Reki that I'd be Shirayuki's bodyguard throughout Golden Week, and told her to come to the family restaurant,

However...

Shouldering the dazzling sniper rifle, Reki was the same as ever, silent and expressionless. I didn't even know whether she was listening to what I was saying.

So, I had to--make sure she understood me, which took a pretty long time.

When I had finished explaining the events that had transpired, and glanced at the clock mounted on the wall...

"Ah."

It's going to be 8:00 PM soon.

Today is the day I promised Shirayuki that I would go see the fireworks with her.

And, we promised to meet each other at 7:00... Oh crap.

Reki, looking exactly like a statue, continued to sit down, watching me.

"Tonight, with Shira...No, I mean I have to go. I'll take my leave first."

I stood up without explaining myself, and Reki didn't say anything either. She didn't even turn her gaze.

She just sat staring at her iced tea, which she hadn't touched.

She continued to stare forward, looking at nobody, just like a doll.

"..."

"...I-am-taking-my-leave. Understand?"

To confirm that she heard me, I repeated myself, and Reki nodded.

But she still remained silent, just nodding, exactly like the robot that she looked like.

Now that I think about it, Reki may not have any friends, but there are some boys that are her die-hard fans. Also, I heard that those people called her Reki-sama, and worshipped her as a Goddess.

Well... It doesn't really matter if she's a robot, or a Goddess, but she has a sort of ethereal feeling. Like she isn't a real human.

However, as I was turning around-

"Are you going out to do something?"

I heard Reki's monotonous voice.

"That's right, is there something?"

"Please be careful. These few days, the wind--appears to be hiding something evil."

What is that supposed to mean?

I pray to you, could you use human language? Goddess-sama?

"Our student body is really evil, right?"

I tossed that sentence down, and left Reki there, who had put on her earphones again. I payed the bill, and left the family restaurant.

I was thinking of calling Shirayuki...but, I thought that it would be better if I just returned immediately.

If Shirayuki is angry, how do I get out of it?

After all, I was the one who set this up, and I, who's been late for so long, stealthily peeked into the living room...but the Shirayuki I saw was sitting there with her eyes wide open in excitement.

Shirayuki...was wearing a yukata. I'm not sure where she got it from.

On the pure white cloth of the yukata, were embroidered flakes of Japanese Dianthus. That pink obi, in terms of height or form, was--I'm afraid that she actually put it on herself^[6]--extremely beautiful.

Her black hair was tied up, something that I had rarely seen, and there was even a hairpin with a picture of Japanese Dianthus on it.

If I had to use one word to describe Aria, it would be 'Cute'.

But, if I were to describe Shirayuki, it could only be--'Beautiful'.

No, what I had just understood, was something that the whole of Butei High knew. Because if Shirayuki were to attend a beauty pageant for the whole of Japan, she would without a doubt win. She was that beautiful. I'm serious.

However, I, as a childhood friend, didn't really notice.

But only now, when she had clad these garments...could I once again appreciate her beauty.

This makes me feel really embarrassed.

Shirayuki was sitting down neatly, facing the charger which her phone was in, her back towards me, who was creeping in from the door.

She's probably waiting for my call...right?

My shadow was on the window...but it seems that she hasn't noticed me.

--This...really makes me want to play around with her.

"..."

I took out my cellphone, and from the corridor...stealthily wrote her an SMS.

"I'm sorry, I still need half an hour."

Send.

Beep Beep.

The white cellphone lit up, smack! Shirayuki, with a speed that was hard to trace with one's eyes, snatched up the phone, holding it in front of her eyes with both hands.

And afterward, with a tap tap noise, she replied.

The me in Dark Mode who had fired off the first blow, read her reply.

"OK, don't worry. I'll keep on waiting."

And at the end, there was even a smiley emoticon.

Hey, shouldn't you be a little angry...?

Thinking this way...

"Actually, I'll be late by 3 hours. Want to cancel it?"

I tried sending that out.

And Shirayuki once again took out the phone she had just replaced, and she read it again.

Direct hit.

Her face suddenly looked like, Armageddon, Ragnarok, the End of Days, whatever you'd like to call it, had just arrived.

Ehehe.

I'm over here, don't you know?

"Come on, don't look like it's the end of the world."

After receiving this SMS, Shirayuki blinked, not quite understanding.

Remote controlling Shirayuki.

Is really fun.

Well, because I felt that continuing to do this was a bit evil,

"Hey, let's go."

so I called out towards her, chuckling.

"Kyaa!"

Shirayuki jumped around 20 centimeters off the mat, in surprise.

How did she do that?

"Ki-Ki-Kin-chan!? Really, you're too much! Have you been watching me from there this whole time!?"

Shirayuki, her face completely red, stood up, that smooth fringe shaking slightly--

She walked towards me hurriedly, and I'm not sure if it was because she was excited or something, but she managed to fall on flat ground.

"Kyaa!"

"What're you screaming for... Ah, I'm sorry that I was late."

"No, no! Don't worry! You're not late at all!"

Said Shirayuki, laughing while waving her hands around.

I'm obviously late, you know... Well, whatever, since the person that was waiting says so, then I'll accept it.

Once Shirayuki noticed that I was looking at her, she hurriedly averted her eyes, smoothing her yukata with her hands.

"Ki-Kin-chan. How do I look? I ordered it online...it isn't ugly, is it?"

"It isn't."

"Th-that's great...ah...how does my hair look? I just had this done at Academy Island's beauty parlor...i-is it ugly?"

"Not at all."

Shirayuki's face, upon hearing my response, became relaxed, making me feel embarrassed.

My heart, feeling a little ticklish, said: "Let's go, then," and strode to the door.

I wore my shoes and looked back. Shirayuki responded with a "Yes," and walked over elegantly to wear her new wooden slippers.

Every move she makes is refined, a perfect example of a **Yamato Nadeshiko**.

Going out at night--

I don't hate it at all.

When I had just arrived at Inquesta from Assault...I had the hollow feeling of not knowing what to do, so everyday, when dinner arrived, I would wander the empty nighttime streets.

"...It's a little cold."

I turned my head, looking at Shirayuki, who was walking behind me daintily.

"Ah, yeah."

But she hurriedly directed her gaze downwards-

I wasn't staring at you, our eyes just met as we turned around.

-As if trying to explain that.

"Shirayuki, do you walk at night often?"

"I don't. If I'm not together with Kinji, I don't normally come out this late."

"Is that so."

...

... ..

I feel like I can't keep up a conversation.

Since I've never really had any reason to talk to a girl, while we were alone together...also, it's because Aria is always talking about America's standard-issue flashbangs, or Germany's newest blades...so I now have the habit of not really listening while others are talking, so I can't really talk to Shirayuki normally.

The vending machines at the sides of the street were flashing, as if they were making fun of us.

"Ab-about that."

Thankfully, Shirayuki started talking to me.

"Th-this...th-this ki-ki-kind of feels...like...a...date..., right...no, no it doesn't...of course, it doesn't..."

"What?"

What are you saying? That kind of Japanese is too weird...I can't understand it at all.

"It's like...we're on a date...right?"

"A date?"

I was wondering what she was going to say, but I never thought she'd say something like this.

I definitely have to say no.

Because if she takes this wrongly, if we ever get into a situation where I'm in Hysteria Mode, I'll be finished.

"This isn't a date. I'm just acting as a bodyguard, protecting my client. That's all."

Butei Law article 5. 「Be as fast as a gust of wind. Butei must win in one blow」.

"Bodyguard..."

Shirayuki's neat eyebrows drooped, as if sad.

"Th-that's right. You're protecting me. Saying that kind of thing...I'm sorry."

She pretended to smile, and apologized.

After that...

Because I was late, when I reached the Butei metro stop--the sound of fireworks already started to reach us from the distance.

Will we make it?

I was looking at Shirayuki buying the metro tickets--while she was still hesitating about leaving Butei High, I said "Then I'll buy your ticket too."

"How could I let Kin-chan treat me? I'll buy it myself."

I let her buy the tickets.

From what I've heard, Shirayuki has never left the school, besides taking the Hotogi's cars.

More like from what I remember, this is the first time she's ever taken a train.

...How strict was her upbringing, exactly?

But, no matter what anyone says, I have succeeded--in opening the door for the caged bird. Even if she's still in another's fist.

We took the subway to Odaiba. And then from Yurikamome to Ariake. From there took the Sea Line to Shinkiba. At last, we got on the Keiyo Line.

We continued to switch trains like that until we reached Kasai Rinkai Park. With only that, Shirayuki looked at me with respect.

To be respected for this kind of thing...it makes me a little...

I scratched my head, a little embarrassed, and took Shirayuki from the station towards the seashore.

Arriving at Kasai Rinkai Park, which was a little like a forest, I saw the streetlights continuing down the seashore. Like a nighttime park.

Not forgetting about my role as a bodyguard, I checked the surroundings. Since it was already night, there were still some street shops open, and people moving around in small groups. It shouldn't be dangerous. Although there were some delinquents looking to mess around with couples, they probably aren't stupid enough to attack gun-wielding Butei.

"...The moon is really beautiful."

"Yeah."

We hadn't seen the fireworks yet, and we continued up the park path down the shore.

At the end of the road was a breathtakingly beautiful man-made beach.

"...It's really beautiful."

"Yeah."

"Kin-chan...um...you don't, feel bored or anything, do you?"

I shook my head at Shirayuki, who had turned towards me, her eyes full of uneasiness.

"I'm not."

"Ah, I...have never really talked with boys, and I don't know anything about what boys find interesting...I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry for something like that. Also, don't just apologize about everything. That's a bad habit."

"I-I'm sorry."

"Didn't I just say not to do that?"

"Ah..I'm..."

I looked at Shirayuki, who was about to fire off another 'Sorry', and I laughed at how weird she was.

Shirayuki dipped her head a little, seeming to feel a little embarrassed, yet a little happy, and her features relaxed.

There may not be anything to talk about, but compared to how she was when we had just left my house, she gave off a more relaxing aura.

We continued to walk towards the seashore...Shirayuki, as normal, was dipping her head.

"It's like I'm dreaming..."

She muttered, as if she couldn't have found something that made her more happy than this.

We arrived at the man-made beach.

As I expected, this place was empty.

This is, as the name suggests, an artificial beach, but because it's forbidden to swim, fish, or barbecue, nobody comes.

I thought that this would be a nice place to watch the Disney fireworks show, but...

"...I think it ended already."

Looking at the air above the Disneyland, at the shore of Tokyo Bay, we could only see the smoke left behind by the fading fireworks.

Bringing her all the way here, only to see this...How embarrassing.

"...I'm sorry. It's all because I was late."

"No, no. Kin-chan isn't in the wrong. I was walking too slowly."

Shirayuki was using her normal Shirayuki method of speaking, not blaming me at all...

But in those eyes, were a trace of disappointment.

"And also, while I was walking...I was reminiscing of our past, so it's fine. I'm fine with just hearing the sound. I could see the fireworks, in my heart."

Shirayuki smiled at me gently, as if she was comforting me.

"Our...past?"

"That's right, the Aomori fireworks festival."

"Ah, that. The one I brought you to...and the one where we got reprimanded severely, afterward."

That was when we were five...the time I forced Shirayuki to come with me.

Now that I think about it, I also used a fireworks festival as an excuse to bring her out.

Did I do the same thing without realizing it?

"...At that time...Kin-chan also brought me out of the Hotogi,"

Shirayuki said. *Chi*, she stepped on the sand, walking towards the sea.

Even though she's on sand, which is hard to walk on, her gait is still so beautiful.

The night breeze--

Lightly brushed through her tied up hair.

"I still remember the fireworks from that night, so don't worry. Today...I had some expectations too...but, even if there are no fireworks, it's fine.

Whether we're at this sea under the moonlight, or even at home, it's fine."

Saying this, Shirayuki turned her back to the stars.

"Because, Kin-chan is by my side."

That smile was genuine. That smile, made while thinking of me, was completely genuine.

Shirayuki...

I... For someone like me...

Can't be a Butei, and can't be a normal person, just a screw-up.

Not only was I late, but I also started playing around with you. Also, I couldn't even let you see one firework. That's the kind of guy I am.

Yet, you don't even have one complaint to give.

You're not angry at all...yet you can wholeheartedly smile for me, and forgive me.

How compassionate could you be.

This...

Instead, this just makes me want to do more for you.

"Shirayuki."

"Yes?"

Hearing me call her name, Shirayuki walked over.

"Aren't you cold? It's cold, isn't it. It's very cold, to be more accurate. Alright. Wear this, and wait for me."

I took off my jacket, and placed it on Shirayuki's shoulders. There was no need for words.

"Kin-chan? Won't you be cold, Kin-chan?"

"I've already prepared myself to be hot, don't worry. I'm going to run a bit."

Before Shirayuki, not really understanding, could speak one word--

I ran towards the station, kicking up the sand.

Leaving my client in the middle of such an empty, wide space may not be too wise, but well, the enemy doesn't exist anyways. It should be fine.

As I thought--this place was very safe.

When I had run back, Shirayuki was holding my school uniform, sitting on a bench by the beach, calmly waiting.

"Shirayuki. Sorry for the wait."

I called to her...hmm?

Shirayuki didn't respond.

"Hey."

I reached over to Shirayuki, who seemed to be hugging my uniform to herself, and patted her shoulder.

Only then did Shirayuki awaken, with an "Ah-!"

Those eyes, so reminiscent of obsidian, seemed to be afraid of something.

...What happened?

"What is it? Why are you frightened?"

"No-nothing. There's nothing. Don't worry. With this by my side...there's nothing wrong."

Shirayuki seemed to be hiding something, holding up the sleeve of my coat.

"This jacket has Kin-chan's scent on it...it makes me feel like Kin-chan is by my side."

I laughed, embarrassed.

"It's my jacket, of course it will. Doesn't the gunpowder smell bad?"

"No. It smells very good."

"You really are weird. Well, let's not think about that, here."

I said, reaching out.

The things I bought for Shirayuki--

At one of the street shops, about to close, I bought incense fireworks, and I held it in front of her.

"...?"

"Let's set off some fireworks. Even if these are 1000 times smaller."

Chcch...Chcch.

Crouching down on the beach, we ignited our fireworks.

I thought that if it was Shirayuki, these Japanese incense fireworks would be fine...

But in reality, it was too...normal. It wasn't festive at all.

Even though that was the case, Shirayuki seemed to be happy, from the bottom of her heart. She was watching the light that these tiny fireworks gave off with delight.

Those beautiful, long-eyelashed, gentle eyes, under the light of the fireworks, seemed to be like stars, shining in the midst of the darkness.

Looking at her this way, it was more obvious than ever. She is...so beautiful.

"Kin-chan."

"Hm, mm? What is it?"

"These fireworks...they're beautiful."

"...Mm."

Chch...

Chch...

"Kin-chan...do you like fireworks?"

What an obscure question.

"Not if it's as small as this. But if it's huge fireworks, I'd probably be a little bit scared. After all, it's human instinct."

"Th...that's true. Ah..."

--Pata.

From the incense firework in Shirayuki's hand, the ember fell off.

I chuckled, embarrassed, and glanced at Shirayuki, who was looking at me. Our eyes met...

Because my hands shook,

--Pata.

The ember on my firework fell off too.

"...Looks like it's over."

"There's still one. You light it."

As I was about to offer her the 100 yen lighter I had bought--

Shirayuki hugged the plastic bag with the fireworks inside to her chest, shaking her head fiercely.

"No. I want to keep this."

"Why?"

"Kin-chan gave this to me, I want to bring it back. If I light it, it'll be a shame."

"Since when were these meant to be kept? Fireworks are meant to be lit, right?"

"But..."

"Just keep it in your memory."

Although, hearing my careless words, Shirayuki...started nodding.



She took out the last firework...and lit it.

Chchh...Chchh.

It seemed as if she really meant to keep it in her memory, as she stared at it intently.

There was nothing I could do, so I just watched her.

"..."

If I look at it like this, yukata are really attractive...

Shirayuki's chest, crouching down like this, could be clearly seen.

Chchh...Chchh.

The light from the incense firework made her skin seem like it was shining as well.

(...Ah...Hey...)

Just now, I could see it.

She.

I don't know why, but she was wearing something black again. Also, now I recalled that lace underwear, [Victory], from inside the drawer. You...really, Shirayuki.

This...now that I think about, Muto said something like this once.

I remember him saying once, that the yukata was the easiest piece of clothing to take off in the world.

Ah--Hey, Kinji.

Don't think about this kind of thing.

If you go into Hysteria Mode now, who knows what will happen.

Think of something else to calm down. So, I started counting in my head. Two, Three, Five--

"Kin-chan...Thank you. Tonight, I won't be able to sleep. I'll be too happy to."

Hearing Shirayuki, still staring at the firework, say this, I looked up.

That's right, I can talk to her. How could I forget about this simple method? Now I don't even know how I came up with counting.

As long as I concentrate on keeping up a conversation, I probably won't notice that black lace underwear.

"You won't be able to sleep...? Don't exaggerate. We just took a train to the park for a stroll...ah..."

I started stammering at the wrong of choice of words, and Shirayuki turned to look at me, a little uncertain.

"Bra?^[7]"

"Ah, no. A walk... Bu-but we did set off fireworks. It wasn't anything great, though."

"...But. This is extremely special to me. Almost like a miracle."

Chch...

Chch...

The light coming from the incense firework had already become extremely weak.

"Kin-chan is always doing miracles for me. Even on the day of the entrance exam, you saved me from those horrible people..."

"Wa-wasn't that just a brawl?"

"And when I was small, and tonight, you...brought me out to see the world...and so, I...wanted to pay that debt back to you, during Butei High."

"That isn't a debt. So, there's no need to pay me back."

My careless words made Shirayuki--once again flash that joyful smile.

"Kin-chan really is Kin-chan."

"What does that mean?"

...Pata.

The last ember, fell down.

Chch... under our gaze, it went out on the sand.

Shirayuki, as if trying to imprint this onto her soul, slowly, slowly, closed her eyes.

Afterwards, she stood up in that refined manner, leaving all that saw her breathless.

Mirroring her movements, I stood up as well.

Shh...

Shhhhh...

The noise of the waves washing up on the sand seemed to echo through the beach--

"Before, when I used the Miko cards to predict for Kin-chan..."

Shirayuki, rushing to the waves, suddenly softly said this to me...I remembered it.

At that time she insincerely said, "As far as I can see, you will be blessed."

"Actually...I predicted that...Kin-chan would 'Disappear'."

"...Disap...pear?"

"From the place you are right now, you will disappear--and it's within a few years."

"That's probably talking about me switching schools. It looks like this wish of mine will be fulfilled the coming year."

"...I think that...this could be Aria bringing you someplace else..."

"Hah."

Hearing Shirayuki's words, I chuckled.

However, Shirayuki's mood, as if she was being chained down by something, was still frail.

"Because Aria has...changed Kin-chan. Ever since Kin-chan met Aria, you've been happier..."

"Me?"

How unexpected--but now that I think about it, in some ways, my heart thought that this was possible.

It's that feeling...that I think is unexpected.

Aria...has changed...me...?

"...That's not it."

My denial was a lot softer than I thought...

"...It's OK..."

"What?"

"As long as Kin-chan could be happy... Even if the one that Kin-chan liked was Aria... It'd be OK if you were together with Aria. Even if I remained in the background, as long as I could support Kin-chan...as long as I could repay the debt I owe Kin-chan... Then I'd be fine."

"Hey, hey. What are you saying--"

"So up until now, I've been doing my best at everything. Studies, student council, clubs...I've been working hard, so I could improve myself...but in the end, these things didn't help Kin-chan at all,"

Shirayuki...interrupted me, and said that.

The Shirayuki I was seeing now was very different from the normal her.

It's as if---the heart she's always hiding, she's pouring it all out to me.

"...Don't say these weird things. Before I said that Aria and I are just partners. And you've been using past tense this whole time. Could it be...that you're talking about the 'Butei Killer' mission from last month?"

I shouldn't ask her directly, but knowing Shirayuki's personality...

Could it be that Shirayuki is agitated because she couldn't help me during the 'Butei Killer' mission last month?

After all, the person who was with me then--was the person that Shirayuki hated with all her heart, Aria.

"No..."

Shirayuki, suddenly spinning around...I couldn't see too well because it was dark, but it seemed that her eyes were full of tears.

And then, Thud.

"Kin-chan--"

"Ah, hey."

She rushed into my arms.

Before, Shirayuki, who took several minutes to get close to me even sitting down, suddenly and unexpectedly, charged into my embrace.

Wh-what's going on?

"Kin-chan, I'm sorry. I'm really, really, really sorry."

I didn't know what Shirayuki, looking up at me, was apologizing for--

But those eyes, full of tears, rendered me speechless.

That face, illuminated by the moonlight. Aah, I've known this from the beginning...

But, it's so indescribably beautiful.

That yukata, although it's the wrong season, that hair, tied up like this, it perfectly fits this Yamato Nadeshiko.

Childhood friends-- From when we were little, we were always together. We were as important as water to each other, being together was like quenching our thirst. We would never allow anything to ever come between us...

But yet I understood, that relationship like water, had let honey ooze in, and mix together.

--Creating a sweetness that drove people crazy, creating something that people would give anything to partake of.

"Kin-chan...suddenly doing this, I'm sorry...until now, I've been scared that you'd hate me, and I didn't dare say anything...but please, even if it's just once...my only dream, please fulfill it..."

Shirayuki, her lips trembling with her words, had an indescribable expression. It was full of...full of the sort of feeling, that if she spoke one more word, she would die.

"Even if it's only now, if it's only now, please look at me, please only look at me..."

As the refreshing yet chilling night breeze washed over us--

Those quiet eyes, under her fringe, those beautiful eyes--

They shut.

"...Kiss...me..."

...I didn't hear wrong...right?

Her voice may have been extremely soft, but it was at such a close distance.

Why...

Why, did you suddenly, make me...

In the moment that my heart started hammering uncontrollably, I felt my blood start flowing.

However...this feeling is a little different.

This isn't the feeling I get when I'm about to enter Hysteria Mode. This is, from the usual trigger--arousal-- It's a little different...

The words...I can't explain it.

Before I realized it, my hand, already slipping from the control of my mind, instinctively...I'm not sure if it was to stop Shirayuki, or what...but it was about to touch her back.

--Bang.

At a distance, the sound of an explosion came over.

"?"

But, overshadowing everything else, was an instinct to protect her.

Shirayuki, so shocked that she curled up, came back to her senses and with me, looked towards the sound...

Over Disneyland came: Bang, Bang Bang.

Gigantic fireworks continued to blossom in the sky.

Just now we had thought it was over, but it appears that it was just an interlude...

"....."

Getting used to this kind of thing, it really can't be helped...

In that moment just now, I had unknowingly stuck my right shoulder in front of my client--and Shirayuki's left breast.

My hand, also trying to shield her body, felt the Beretta strapped to her thigh.

...This is all because of the training I received in Assault.

Even the noise of fireworks makes me automatically shield my client.

Since I was scared and embarrassed that Shirayuki, seeing what I was like just now, would misunderstand what I did, I turned around, not daring to face her.

Our feet were just about touching, just now...

But because of the actions I had taken just now, we were only half a step away from each other.

We might have only been 40 centimeters apart, but I felt that it would be hard to get that close again.

"...I'm sorry."

Shirayuki, appearing to have given up on something, raised her head to look at the fireworks.

But that expression was so hollow, it was as if she wasn't really here.

I, not knowing what to do, also--

Raised my head to take a look at the fireworks, which were like magic, blossoming into many different colors.

Looking at the night sky above Tokyo Bay, seeing the floating, early summer fireworks.

As if we had lost our souls, we continued to stare.

--I didn't think that...this would be our farewell.

5th Ammo: Blazing Diamond Dust

After Golden Week, Adseard will start.

Aru=Kata, in which I have to perform, is during the closing ceremony, so recently I've just been passing the time doing random things, since the classes are shortened.

Yesterday, after Shirayuki went back to Academy Island...she said she had forgotten something, and she went back to her own dormitory.

And before long, she sent me an SMS.

"Kin-chan, I'm sorry about tonight. You must be angry. I can't face you right now, so I'll be staying over here for today."

To be honest, I've had enough of continuously guarding her against a non-existent entity...

And really, I left her completely unguarded at night, and still, nothing happened, so-

"I'm not angry. Let's just count that as over and done with. There's no need to worry about it anymore, alright? Also, if I stop being your bodyguard in the middle of the assignment, Masters will get angry, so I'll continue with it. Tomorrow, after you're finished with your committee work, call me."

-I sent her that message, and went to sleep, alone.

However, I couldn't sleep at all, last night. It was partially because I was feeling regret about the incident at the artificial beach, but also, for some reason...I was extremely uneasy.

But I don't know why I was so uneasy.

...And so, because of this, I didn't get enough sleep at all.

Right now, I was holding back my drowsiness and punching tickets with Muto at the auditorium doors, which had already been converted into the stage for the Adseard opening ceremony.

This auditorium may have many doors, but because it's located deep within Butei High, I don't need to act as security at the same time.

And the door we were responsible for was the only exit to the media lounge.

So I couldn't skip even if I wanted to.

Even though, in the period before the opening ceremony, several camera-carrying and headset-wearing journalists had hurriedly passed through...

"...The song we're performing, 'Who Shot the Flash', is a cover version, and it's also a copied version. Added to this, the lyrics were replaced, right? Changing it to that degree is just a joke."

Muto, bored out of his mind from the work, was sitting on a folding chair, complaining.

"Why did they choose that song?"

I, who had nothing to do as well, asked him.

"You know how the 'Bang Ba-Ba-Ba-Bang' lyrics were the only ones that weren't changed? It's because they thought it sounded like gunshots."

"Ha...as expected of Butei High, people will..."

I struggled to hold in my yawn, and looked up towards the sky, which was also clear, today.

"Anyways, in the end, did Hotogi-san...join the cheerleaders for Aru=Kata?"

"Shirayuki? No, she didn't."

"Is that so-"

Muto suddenly started dragging his words, as if he was feeling a profound regret.

"Kinji, now that I think about it...you're a bodyguard for Hotogi-san right now, right?"

"That's right. Along with Aria."

"Hotogi-san, even while protected, doesn't feel strange at all. After all, she's one of those people that people would give anything to protect."

"I don't really think she needs to be protected."

She's able to fight on equal terms with Aria, after all.

"...Then...Kinji. Who is it?"

"What?"

"I'm asking, as for Shirayuki and Aria. Which one is your type?"

"Huh?"

My eyebrows shot up.

'Neither of them', before I could say that...Muto, with a clatter, turned his folding chair to face me.

"It's Aria, right?"

"Why would it be Aria?"

...Why did I pause, there?

"About that... Well, I was thinking that you get along better with girls that looked younger."

"Who would be able to get along with that lion cub. I'm a human, you know?"

"Before, when Aria was talking with normal girls during school...all she could talk about was you, you know? You guys are lovers, right?"

"Impossible."

"Th-then, Kinji...Do you want to have a relationship with Hotogi-san, then?"

"...You know something? Why does even Muto have to guess about these sort of things?"

Thinking back to what happened with Shirayuki last night, I automatically became angry.

"Hmph, well...Aren't Butei supposed to be infinitely curious?"

"...Curiosity killed the cat. Even that is written on the Butei textbooks."

I tossed those words down, and slumped down on the desk, not willing to answer anymore questions.

"Come on, answer me. If you don't, I'll get a 4 ton truck and squash you to death."

"Ooh, why don't you try it out? I'll meet you with my Kinji Model Beretta."

I used a manner of speaking akin to those in Assault, and entered my Ignore Muto Mode.

Even with this, Muto didn't give up.

With a, 'Come-on-and-tell-me-already' expression, he continued to stare at me.

1 minute.

2 minutes...

When the third minute had elapsed, Muto's spiky head bowed down towards me...

"--I'm sorry!"

"What's this, all of a sudden? You're too loud."

"I, nearly became a bastard!"

"?"

"Because I tried to get you to like Aria. Also...I was praying that you could get along well with the girl you like."

Muto, finishing his sentence, folded his arms and looked up resolutely.

...I don't get it.

I don't get any of them.

I wasn't willing to return to those topics, and Muto seemed to feel the same way, so we started talking about music, movies, and motorcycles, slowly whittling away the time.

At 4:00, Muto's class had ended. It was only me left, in front of the unused door. I had nothing to do, so I just sat there, willing the time to pass.

...Nod...Nod.

In the sunlight, I was sitting on the folding chair, like that...I was totally burned out from my continuous guarding, and I hadn't gotten enough sleep...Finally, I descended into a haze.

In my dream I saw Aria crying while chasing a peach bun, rolling down a ramp. When she had accidentally fallen inside the water...

"Hey, Kinji--!!"

Thud!

With Muto grabbing me by the shoulder, I woke up.

"--?"

This isn't good, I had completely fallen asleep.

The clock on the wall had advanced steadily while I was asleep.

It was already 5:00.

Did Muto run back here? It looks like he's out of breath.

Is he angry because I fell asleep? -- That doesn't seem to be it. What happened?

"What is it?"

I wrinkled my eyebrows--

Muto pointed at the cellphone in my pocket.

"Situation D7, we have a Situation D7."

-- With a start, I woke up.

Situation D -- It's a code especially for Adseard, one that means something has happened within Butei High.

And, for it to reach D7, it means: "The current events are not clear, only the people receiving this message can act. Also, to protect the target's safety, do not let this get out. Butei High will continue on with Adseard as planned. The incident must be solved secretly." -- a situation like that.

I took out my cellphone, and noticed that I really did receive a message from Butei High while I was asleep.

What on Earth has happened?

Not even leaving me time to read the message, Muto whispered into my ear, saying,

"Hotogi-san seems to have disappeared. We haven't been able to reach her since noon."

"-- Disappeared?"

I hurriedly confirmed the contents of Butei High's message --

and noticed that Shirayuki had sent me one new message.

And the contents --

froze the blood running through my body.

"Kin-chan, I'm sorry. Farewell."

-- This is too weird.

For me, her childhood friend, I understood. These words were too strange.

Because even if she was brooding about the events of yesterday, and leaving home, it's impossible that she would do this.

What had happened at the man-made beach should have been resolved by the SMS I had sent yesterday.

I wasn't really sure what Shirayuki was thinking, but she's always been absolutely obedient to me. If I say it's over, then it means it's over. She won't ever speak about that again. She'll pretend it never happened.

Also, Shirayuki's sense of responsibility is very strong. She would definitely put her work -- her work for Adseard first, she would definitely wait until the closing ceremony is finished. And so, because she suddenly disappeared, Butei High felt the need to give the order for a Situation D.

I understand completely.

This is not an ordinary disappearance.

Something dangerous must have happened to her -- !

Letting things become the way they are now -- whatever I say, are all just excuses.

I never could have imagined that Shirayuki was in danger.

And even Aria, who was so alert in the beginning, gave up on the assignment.

But even though that was the case --

I was too stupid.

I was too careless.

Shirayuki might really have been targeted.

I thought back to what I had screamed at Aria only 2 days earlier.

"Just hearing that 'Durandal' could appear is already enough to make you think 'I hope that he appears.' And without knowing it, you're deluding yourself into thinking that the 'enemy' is here!"

That...Maybe I had gotten it the wrong way around.

I was the one that was thinking "I hope he doesn't exist."...and without knowing it, I had treated him as 'Non-existent'.

I rushed through the road leading up to Butei High --

I knew nothing about where she might be, so I could only search this one, small road.

I had split up with Muto to look for her, but, where on Earth do I start?

The me as of right now doesn't have a clue.

But this is Situation D7. If I start asking random people, I might be putting Shirayuki in danger.

When I called Shirayuki, it didn't connect, so I called Aria. However, she, for whatever reason, didn't pick up. Her phone should be ringing.

(Aria...!)

If I had done what we should have been doing from the very beginning, and been protecting Shirayuki, this wouldn't have happened.

However, the reason she's gone is me.

I didn't take her at her word, and now...because I didn't trust her, these were the consequences --

(I...aren't I the most retarded, idiotic, piece of trash!)

Shirayuki -- said she 'trusted' me. From the night I started to protect her.

I trust you.

She said that, clearly...

But, I betrayed her trust--!

Like a dog, I searched every road, every corner.

But time continued to pass, while I hadn't found anything.

I...Can I not do anything?

The me right now --

I can't even protect one girl?

Why -- am I -- so useless!

(But...Even if I am useless, I still have to do something!)

Even if I have to turn this island upside down, I have to continue to look for her.

Search. Only that. That's all I can do.

Shirayuki.

I'm not a hero like you said I was.

I'm a scumbag that lies sleeping while you're in danger.

However, even if I'm a scumbag, even if I can't change that, the trust that you put in me, I have to repay it!

-- If I can't even do that, I'm not worth of even being a scumbag!

While I was running around the southern corner of Butei High -- my phone rang.

In one movement, I took it out and pressed the answer key.

"Kinji-san. This is Reki. I'm watching you right now."

-- Reki!



"A Situation D7 seems to have occurred. I looked at my phone during a break in the Snipe competition."

"Ah, yeah."

Now that I think about it, Reki is the Japanese representative at Adseard.

And I could hear through the phone, faint voices shouting: "What are you doing, Reki!" "You could've gotten a world record!"

Whatever Reki was saying was overshadowed by those voices.

"Reki, where are you right now? It's too noisy over there, I didn't hear what you said just now."

"I am on the seventh floor of Snipe."

"Snipe--"

Hearing that, I turned northwards.

Snipe is next to the underground sniper range and is situated at the northern reaches of the island, a large building.

"I'm sorry about the noise. That had nothing to do with Shirayuki, don't worry."

"What? What's going on over there!"

"I left the field in the middle of the competition, so I was disqualified. Everybody is extremely angry now."

From the phone, I heard a *thud* from a window being opened.

And a Bang!

A gunshot rang out.

Woah, those voices from just now flared up again.

Reki--!?

When I was about to call out her name, *crack*!

A fragment splintered off the lamppost next to me.

"Kinji-san, please calm down. When people become upset, their effectiveness is decreased by half."

Ju...just now, was that something that Reki shot?

From the Snipe building to here... It has to be at least 2 kilometers, right?

"That's exactly what you are right now. Have you calmed down?"

"Ah... Yeah."

Kch, I could hear her loading another bullet.

Talking on the phone--

and shooting with such an outdated SVD sniper rifle. How can she still be so accurate?

"I don't know where Shirayuki is -- but the currents don't feel right. Check gutter 9."

On the outskirts of this artificial island, there are 28 gutters.

They're used to control the water levels on the island, holes that water can be pumped out of.

"Wh-which way?"

I had just asked, when

"I am...a single bullet."

The only response was Reki's habit when concentrating, those mantra-like words.

Crack.

On the asphalt a little away from my foot, a deep mark appeared, created by a sniper rifle.

Crack. Crack. Crack Crack.

Wha...What's going on?

Reki was using the SVD's semi-auto to write something on the road.

When it was finished --

"Please go investigate in that direction. I will continue to look out for Shirayuki-san from here."

--it was an arrow sign that would fit exactly within a circle with a diameter of 30 centimeters.

I didn't notice anything out of ordinary with the flow in the gutters...

But next to the grating of gutter 9, I found signs that someone had removed it and put it back on.

From that distance, she was able to see such minute changes within the currents... Hey, this isn't the time to be stunned by Reki's superhuman sight.

I flipped open the Butei handbook I always kept with me, and checked to see where this gutter led to.

"The underground warehouse--!?"

My own words caused me to start sweating.

This wasn't because I was running. It was a cold sweat.

In the extremely dangerous Tokyo Butei High, this, along with Assault and Masters was recognized as the third danger zone...the underground warehouse.

The underground warehouse is just a pretty name we use for outsiders' benefit.

That place is actually--

the armory.

This isn't good.

This is horrible.

I may not be Aria, but even I get a bad feeling about this.

While Butei High remains ignorant... Something is going to happen.

And Shirayuki has been sucked into the middle of it--

Under Butei High, the rooms are multi-layered, like cabins in a ship. From the second floor below ground and onwards, it's all below water. I ran

down the stairs, rushed towards the elevator, disregarding the forbidden access sign, and punched in the emergency code--

But, the elevator didn't move.

That's weird.

This isn't normal. I know that much, already.

I stepped into the Pressure Room, and pulled the cover of the circuit box for the elevator.

The emergency stairs, leading into the floor like a manhole, was meant to be used in case of flooding, so the walls were made of three metal plates.

I entered in the confirmation password, inserted my keycard, and used the magnetic IC inside the Butei handbook to open the door, and ran the stairs down to the floor below--!

I also used the emergency stairs for the boiler room below, and that way, I reached the 3rd floor, the 4th floor, the 5th floor, continuously going down.

The stairs were already rusty, and I fell while hurrying down. I received many scratches and bruises while sliding down.

...Ouch.

It hurts.

But, I don't have time for this right now! If there's even a 1% chance that Shirayuki is here, I have to continue going down!

For her sake. Shirayuki, who trusts me implicitly -- I have to save her--!

Thinking this way, I finally reached the 7th floor--

The underground warehouse.

This is the deepest part of Butei High.

The place that gutter 9 links to.

Of course, this isn't a place one can enter just by going through the gutter...but if one tries, it is possible. And also, the students regularly say that Butei High, because it's such a big place, doesn't have good security against intruders. Everyone just assumes that nobody is stupid enough to try and enter an island filled to the brim with hundreds of Butei.

After reaching one of the corners of the underground warehouse, an unused records room...I noticed something.

--Darkness.

I opened the door noiselessly, peering out into the corridor, but everything was still pitch black.

The electricity's been cut.

I took out my cellphone, planning to call Muto and Reki -- But for some reason, probably because the signal transmitter inside the room was broken, I had no signal.

Damn it.

I was angry because I couldn't even predict this happening.

This isn't like a game, flashlights or walkie-talkies won't appear out of nowhere.

But even if that's the case, going up to the surface to call for back up is a waste of time.

More important than communication, than light, is time.

I don't know whether this decision is correct.

But, Shirayuki might be hurt right now. All because I was so stupid. The only thing I can do is save her immediately! Anything else is unimportant!

I tried to lessen the noise of my footsteps as I walked through the halls, looking for a trace of Shirayuki.

The corridors were very wide, and on each side were rows and rows of ammunition racks.

I used the light of my cellphone to take a look at my Butei handbook. In front of me should be an empty space, much like a hall.

It's the storage place for the underground warehouse's most dangerous armaments. The room called the big warehouse.

From there...

" ... "

I could sense somebody.

There are people arguing.

I may not be able to hear what they're saying, but there are definitely people there.

I reached for my Beretta--

I brushed the handle, and then frowned.

In the red light illuminating the darkness, I could see warnings like 'KEEP OUT' or 'DANGER' written all around.

This is an ammunition dump.

If a bullet accidentally hits something dangerous, and it explodes -- Butei High would be blown away.

That isn't an exaggeration.

Academy Island would become just like a ship that got hit by a torpedo. There are armaments in here easily able to cause that level of destruction. Also, the armaments in here are stored messily.

If an explosion sets off any secondary explosions, then Butei High's faculty, alumni, and every competitor in Adseard -- the elite Butei from all over the world -- will be slaughtered.

That isn't it. A lot of journalists and the like are here to report on Adseard. If an incident like several hundred Butei getting blown to pieces actually occurs, they will most definitely get the news out.

...In short, I cannot use my gun.

I felt for the butterfly knife concealed among my clothes, and opened it, soundlessly.

Illuminated under the red light, the knife edge was glowing.

The structure of the butterfly knife makes it easy for it to make a lot of noise, so it didn't fit a situation like this.

I can't wave it around, or I'll have to keep it.

Thinking this way, and using the knife edge as a mirror to look around corners...I took in a sharp intake of breath.

Under the red light, around 50 meters away from me, next to a mountain of ammunition--

stood Shirayuki in her Miko garments.

Shirayuki was talking to someone, next to the carelessly stacked...or maybe moved...stack of ammunition.

I wanted to charge in, but I quelled the impulse. I have to understand the situation first. And I can't be sure, but that unknown person might be pointing a gun at Shirayuki as we speak.

I stuck my body as close to the corner as it would go, and listened calmly.

"Why do you want me, Durandal. Why do you need, someone like me...a person without any special traits of any kind."

Shirayuki's voice was full of fear.

--Durandal--!

So, he really does...exist...!

"There are some people who keep themselves hidden in the shadows. And as for the people on the surface, they don't know the darkness within the darkness."

It was a strange voice. It was masculine, and the wording was ancient, yet -- it was a girl's voice.

"There are those who fade into the darkness, ready to attack. But in a battle, those that hide themselves deepest are the victors. My great ancestor was facing that darkness -- which also means, she was part of the light. And so, my ancestor was tricked by the darkness."

"What are you saying...?"

"The enemy is already in the darkness, training ability users. And so, we, unbeknownst to our enemies, have to train stronger ability users -- those diamonds in the rough -- So, the fact that we reach our hands out towards the gemstones that that defective Butei are protecting, is something completely natural. This isn't strange at all. Shirayuki."

"Defective...Butei...? Who are you talking about?"

From within Shirayuki's voice came a hint of anger.

And the girl she was facing adopted a mocking tone.

"The Holmes girl was extremely troublesome -- but as I predicted, the person who finally chased that girl away is Tohyama Kinji. If that guy isn't a defective product, then what is he?"

"Kin-chan -- Kin-chan is not defective!"

"But in reality, he was unable to protect you."

"Th...that isn't it! Kin-chan didn't lose to someone like you. I-I just didn't want to trouble him...so I didn't call out to him!"

"You didn't want to trouble him, huh. But Shirayuki. You also played in my plan, you know?"

"Me...?"

"You remember that phone call, right?"

The voice that came out of the darkness nearly made my heart stop.

Right now, is she mimicking my voice!?

"Come quickly, Shirayuki! Come! I'm in the shower!"

"--!"

I realized that Shirayuki was so stunned, she couldn't speak a word.

That girl seemed to think her reaction was very amusing, and so she continued to speak,

"Holmes set up several traps and probes -- but the person observing your room, was me. I saw that you were in the living room, and that the light had gone off in Tohyama's shower... Also, Kanzaki Aria had just arrived. How could I have left such a perfect opportunity alone, knowing your personality?"

"It was you who pretended to be Kin-chan and goaded me into action -- and Aria and Kin-chan's relationship...you destroyed it...?"

"Things just went downhill from there. Within the space of a few days, Aria had left you two."

She...was watching us?

Has she...always been hiding around us?

--Durandal.

She was at our side. At Aria's and mine, as well as -- her target, Shirayuki's, side.

She got rid of Aria, the main protective force. And then she waited for me to show an opening.

And now, she wants to take Shirayuki away...!

"Come with me, Shirayuki. But...before you can become one of us, you should first let go of Tohyama. The person that deserves your devotion is someone else."

Her next words rendered my mind a complete blank.

"Right now, I'm going to bring you to -- I-U."

I-U.

The organization that made Kanzaki Kanae -- Aria's mother, carry 864 years worth of crime, the people behind Mine Riko Lupin the 4th, the 'Butei Killer'--

Who killed my brother--!

Nii-san.

Ever since I was little I respected the person who was stronger than anyone, who was smarter than anyone, and who could still be so compassionate -- Nii-san.

But Nii-san, by those bastards...!

I understood. I understood that my blood was going into a frenzy.

Clenched in my fist, the butterfly knife that my brother had given me was trembling.

Click. Click...

"There's one more thing."

The girl's voice became slightly clearer.

"In this matter, I made one miscalculation. I read your personality wrong. I thought that you had a very obedient character."

"...What is that supposed to mean...?"

"'I will hand myself in to you without struggling. But in exchange, do not hurt any Butei High students, especially Tohyama Kinji.' -- is what you agreed. And I kept to your conditions. However, you secretly -- called him."

Her last words, changed their target.

Clearly, she was speaking directly with me.

--So I've been noticed already--

This thought flashing into my mind, I—

"Shirayuki, run!"

—shouted, and charged towards Shirayuki.

I had gone mad. Well, if I had gone mad, I was only half mad.

I hadn't charged in without thinking at all.

Judging from her voice -- I know the enemy's rough location.

I want to try and force the enemy into submission with one move.

This is the ammunition dump, after all.

I may not be in Hysteria Mode, but the enemy can't use guns.

There was about 50 meters between us. I can cross that in 7 seconds.

She only has 7 seconds to grasp what weapons I have, decide whether to run or fight, prepare her weapons, and assume a defensive stance -- how could anyone do that?

"Kin-chan!?"

Shirayuki's scared voice echoed throughout the warehouse.

"--No, don't come! Run away! Butei cannot beat Choutei!"

Following that cry, more like a wail-

Next to my foot--

Kch!

Something, moving at a speed my eyes could not possibly perceive, hooked my foot.

"Woah!?"

The *Thud!* from my fall echoed around the warehouse.

Next to my foot was a beautifully curved, silver blade.

I've seen this in the Assault textbooks -- It's called a Yataghan, a French blade. It was in the section for ancient weaponry, a blade meant for fencing.

"'l'anse de la Pucelle' -- I'll make you taste the shame of those who are shackled, Butei."

In the wake of her voice, from within the blade, some sort of white stuff was leaking out. I knew nothing about it besides that it was white, but with a *crackle*...*crackle*, it firmly stuck my calf to the ground.

I-I can't move.

"--Wha-!?"

That white stuff started to reach up my thigh, preventing me from standing up.

What is this...!?

It's cold.

...Ice...!?

I didn't see anything on the blade. And the floor by my feet was ordinary cement.

How did she do it?

I can't stand up anymore.

--I was firmly stuck to the floor by the ice.

"My bloodline has always walked in the light, but that substance belongs in the darkness within the darkness -- I am a much more proficient tactician

than any counselor. And so, the thing I hate most in this world is 'Miscalculation'."

After this enemy, who I had never seen before until now, spoke, *Pa* --

The emergency lights inside the room went out.

I was completely wreathed in darkness.

"...N-no! Stop it! What are you doing! --Uu...!"

Clink Clank...!

From Shirayuki, I heard the noise of iron.

The enemy is moving.

"--Shirayuki!"

But even with my call, Shirayuki -- didn't answer.

What happened? What happened to her?

I was extremely anxious, but --

Stuck to the floor by ice, I could do nothing.

Th-This isn't the first time.

I haven't been able to do anything yet.

I'm not saving Shirayuki, I'm just making things worse.

And from the start, that was all I'd been doing. From the time I started being Shirayuki's bodyguard.

I had no way of assessing the situation, I made no preparations, and just whittled my time away. But when something really happens...I, still unable to think of anything, came here, just causing her more trouble.

Even with my eyes wide open, looking at Shirayuki in danger, I could do nothing.

I could only spectate as the situation grew worse and worse--!

Kch!

The sound of another blade cutting through the air reached me.

Even in the darkness, I understood.

That is the blade that is meant to kill me--!

Fyuu - The sound of the other blade came from behind me -- Clank!

And in the air, it burst into sparks.

I...

am still alive.

What happened?

Just now, what happened--?

"It's time to switch out."

As if cutting the darkness and despair in my soul, a voice rang out.

Chh. The warehouse became slightly brighter.

That light -- *pa, papa, papapapapap*

As if trying to surround this warehouse, as big as a sporthall, lights continually flared up.

The darkness from just now, not even allowing me to see my own hands, was replaced by blazing light.

"You're there, aren't you 'Durandal' --! For the crime of abducting minors, I'm taking you into custody!"

Click, stepping on my back and head while striding forward -- was someone wearing Butei High's sailor school uniform,

"Aria!?"

"Holmes, hmm?"

That unseen girl's voice came out of the shadows.

And any sign of Shirayuki...had disappeared. It looks like she was forced into another part of the warehouse.

The empty space in that stack of ammunition.

Kich Kich! Two of the blades flew through the air, towards Aria.

Aria, watch out!

She immediately spun her own wakizashi around like a whirlwind, deflecting the two blades.

"How many more are you going to throw at me? You're like one of those baseball machines."

Aria raised her blade in a batting position --

Clatter...

The sound of a door closing reached us from somewhere.

...After a while, there was still silence...

"Looks like she ran away."

Aria turned her head, and threw aside the blade that was stuck into the ground next to me.

And afterward, she crouched down by my head.

"Well, it looks like Idiot Kinji has some uses after all."

"Wh-what does that mean?"

"If you are brave, be brave. If you are pretty, act pretty. If you are noble, act noble. And if you are an idiot, just be an idiot -- there's a saying like that, right? So the best thing for Idiot Kinji to do is go into Idiot Kinji Mode."

...I didn't think that she'd be able to say idiot five times after just appearing.

Also, don't crouch down in front of my face.

To avoid looking up her skirt, I moved the only thing I could, my neck, and turned to one side.

Aria stood up, and she started running over to the pile of ammunition, checking on Shirayuki -- Squeak.

The sound of her sneakers suddenly stopped.

"...?"

I raised my head to look over.

Only to see Aria take a step back hurriedly, and raise her blade towards the air.

And she sliced something that I couldn't see.

"...What is it?"

"It's a steel wire. To be more precise, it's a TNK steel wire. Exactly where my head was."

Whoosh. Aria, turning to look around, swung her blade again.

"And this one is at your height. If you had run towards her, your carotid artery would have been cut. She was probably planning to kill you with this if the throwing knife didn't hit."

"Sh-she's really cunning...I didn't think she would manage to bring Shirayuki away while setting these traps up..."

"But, all this is useless. It cannot escape my eyes."

said Aria, full of confidence. She picked up the blade that she had thrown aside just now, and walked towards Shirayuki's.

--And, she immediately returned to crouch by my side.

"How is Shirayuki?"

"She isn't hurt. But she's tied up. We're going to help her, you come as well."

Aria, finishing what she was saying, placed her knee onto my body. Scrape, Scrape.

And used the edge of her blade to scrape away the ice holding me to the floor.

"Aria...After you disappeared, what happened?"

"'Durandal' was watching Shirayuki from somewhere we couldn't see. Also, I could sense that she was getting closer and closer. But, if Reki and I were there, she definitely wouldn't attack. So I gave up on being a bodyguard on purpose."

"After the fight with me in Assault...leaving, was that planned as well?"

"Butei Law Charter 2. 「You must fulfill the contract in the commission」. I will never give up. You, sleeping on the roof, really made me angry, but I thought that it was a good opportunity."

Crack. Aria chipped off the ice by my elbow as well.

"'Durandal' is one of the few spies in I-U. As long as you are the only one carelessly guarding Shirayuki, she won't pay any attention to me. You look unsatisfied. Is there a problem?"

Finally regaining my freedom of movement, I faced Aria, who had basically been calling me an idiot the whole time...I'll hold off on my sarcastic comments for now.

After all, she did save me.

"The enemy--seems to have disappeared. Looks like she ran."

According to the map I saw on the handbook, there should have been no way to move to any other floors from this room.

"If there is more than one enemy, she will keep her distance, and think of a way to split up the opponents---and take she will take them one by one. That is how Durandal fights."

I see...Then, were Shirayuki and I separated according to her plans as well?

"The only thing is, when a tactician's plan is broken, she will be inclined to reduce everything to 'nothingness'. So, she might come back to kill Shirayuki. First, we have to get Shirayuki to safety."

Aria finished speaking and stood up, pulling my sleeve towards where Shirayuki lay.

Shirayuki, by the wall of the warehouse, was restrained by manacles.

Her mouth, bound by a piece of cloth, continued to emit sounds like "MMPH."

I took the gag out of her mouth,

"Kin-chan, are you alright!? You aren't hurt, are you!?"

...She continued to selflessly worry about me.

"I'm fine. You should be more worried about yourself..."

I said, lifting up the lock around Shirayuki's chest.

From every angle, the lock looked like a giant, heavy hamburger. And there were 3 successive locks, a setup some called a 'Drum Lock'. It's very rarely seen, and it was binding her extremely tightly.

Aria and I took out our lockpicking tools from the Butei toolkit, and we tried to pick the lock--

However, the structure of the locks were too complex, and we couldn't even open one of them.

"Kin-chan...I'm sorry...If I didn't hide it from everyone, and come here dressed like this...she said she would blow up Academy Island, and kill Kin-chan..."

Hearing this, feelings of agony once again surfaced in my heart.

I--without me even knowing, I was treated as a hostage?

"When did she say this to you?"

"Yesterday...when Kin-chan went to buy the fireworks, she sent me a message threatening me...I was scared that Kin-chan would be hurt...and so, I accepted...uu....Uuu..."

"It's fine now. Don't cry."

So, that was when--huh.

No wonder Shirayuki was acting so strange when I returned.

"Aria...I'm sorry. I've been treating Aria so badly...yet you came to save me..."

Hearing Shirayuki's words, Aria went "Hmph," and her cheeks reddened a little.

"I-I...was only protecting you because of the contract. And my real goal is only the capture of Durandal. There's no need to thank me."

Saying this, she pulled at the chains binding Shirayuki, moaning.

What you're saying and what you're doing is really contradictory...Well, right now, that isn't important.

But anyways...there's no way I'm going to be able to open this lock.

If Shirayuki was using her inhuman swordsmanship, then maybe--but Shirayuki is the one that is bound, and her katana has been taken.

I'd like to cut the chains connecting her to the wall, but it would be impossible to move that without heavy machinery.

Aria investigated the links in the chain to see whether there were any weaknesses...

and she asked Shirayuki,

"Did you see Durandal's face?"

"No...she was always hiding inside the shadow of the mountain of ammunition. And even when she escaped out that door, I couldn't see what she looked like."

Shirayuki's eyes motioned towards a door, leading up the roof, and Aria put on an expression that said "As I thought."

"...That's to be expected. Durandal would never let anybody see her appearance."

From what Aria said, it appears that she already knows a lot about Durandal from all her research.

And so, I asked something that I had been curious about the entire time.

"Aria. Just now, that ice..."

The ice that held me to the floor.

At the beginning, I suspected that she had used liquid nitrogen, but that can't be it. When I was in Assault, I used liquid nitrogen to freeze time bombs. However...it was a completely different method.

Aria--

"She has an ability,"

she said straightforwardly, giving me the answer I least wanted to hear.

"Yeah, about that...If we measure her by governmental standards, she's a type III ability user--She could possibly be called, a magician."

Shirayuki's in depth explanation made me frown.

Magician...huh?

"Impossible..."

"It's completely possible. Recently, the elite Butei have been getting used to these kinds of situations. Our school has the SSR too, right?"

This...I understand. I just wanted to clarify.

The SSR.

Shirayuki was in that department, undergoing extremely strict training in areas like divination, ability investigation etc. Many methods of abnormal investigation are researched there.

But the SSR is the one class about which every piece of information is highly classified, so all those with no relation to it only know the basic details.

And obviously, I, who wanted to become a normal person, tried my best to stay away from that most abnormal of worlds. Even in rumours, I had never heard of anything like magicians, who I thought only appeared in games.

"There's nothing frightening about it, Kinji. The power of ability users, from my experience--is only at the level of street magicians. They're no match for bullets."

"But, she has a special ability. She might even have an attack that we don't know about."

"You're really cowardly. I hate it when Kinji is like this. But...Well, relax. I haven't taught you how to 'awaken' by yourself yet, so you can sit this one out. I can take care of her by myself."

As if refuting Aria's words...

Rumble--!

A deep noise echoed through the underground warehouse.

We looked around, hurriedly--

Gurgle, Gurgle...

Water was not draining out the holes in the floor--it was rising up through them.

The amount of water flowing out continued to increase, and within a minute, it had already turned into a fountain.

The rising water started to creep around our feet.

"...It's seawater."

Aria said, twitching her nose like a rodent.

"Yeah. There's probably a malfunction in the water pumps."

The water went from our feet...to our ankles. And from our ankles, to our calves.

It continued to rise.

This isn't good.

At this rate, even inside this warehouse, which is as big as any sports hall--within 10 minutes, the whole place will be submerged.

Although that's more than enough time for Aria and I to get out through the stairs to the roof, we couldn't leave Shirayuki behind.

Tactician...huh.

"...That girl really is a tactician, Aria. It's been discovered."

Aria didn't answer, and she continued to look at the water, slowly panicking.

"Discovered...what are you talking about...?"

Hearing Shirayuki's question, Aria's face turned bright red. She raised her head and glared at me, as if saying, "Don't you dare."

But...seeing the current situation... Forgive me.

"Tsuduri said this before, Aria can't swim."

"Th-that's not it. I-if there's a life ring, I can still...!"

"...Why would that sort of thing be here? Aria, go up first."

"I...I can't! Leaving you alone and running by myself, I won't do it!"

"That's not it, this isn't running away, it's attacking first. Quickly, go up. Steal the key back from Durandal--Even if you stay here, you won't be able to open this lock. You should know that by now."

"...Bu-but."

"Only you, whose battle ability is high, can take care of that girl quickly! I don't have any experience fighting against Choutei, only you can do this! ...Quick! Every second counts!"

Thinking back to the basics of Assault, I made my decision.

Aria looked at Shirayuki again, worried, and then she took another look at the water, already at her thighs--finally, she gave her own lockpicking tools to me.

"...I understand. But, if you can't take it anymore, call me, understand?"

Even if I call you, we still won't be able to open this lock--

All three of us understood this.

Alright, I answer Aria, who was turning around hesitantly.

The water continued to rise, furiously.

The lock on Shirayuki was still unpickable.

It will only be 5 minutes before the entire warehouse is submerged.

I searched through the water, hoping to find some sort of tool...but I couldn't find anything.

The water had already risen to around my shoulders.

What do I do...

What the hell do I do...!

"Kin-chan...Go,"

Shirayuki said to me, who could only stand there, doing nothing.

And, she strongly...smiled.

Even now, she still worries about me--

"...Don't say that."

"The Miko of the Hotogi are armed Miko. They are destined to sacrifice their body and soul for people. Kin-chan, run away, quickly. Just leave me behind..."

"How could I leave you here by yourself!"

When Shirayuki was about to answer me, who was shouting--

The water finally reached her mouth, and Shirayuki contorted her face, looking up in order to breathe.

"Don't worry, even if I die, nobody will be sad. The teachers and students may praise me, but those that really like me...don't exist--Fuah, they all...they don't like me, they just appreciate my powers as a Hotogi Miko...Fuah..."

Shirayuki was now thrusting her face up just so she could breathe.

My feet finally lifted off the flow, reaching the point where I had to swim to stay afloat.

"Shira...Shirayuki! Aria will bring the key back immediately! Even if it's 1 minute, you have to endure! Breathe in deeply! The client has to listen to the bodyguard! I'll think of a way to get rid of the lock--"

"Your contract! It's void! Run away--live on...!"

"Shirayuki...! Aaah, Fuck...the reason this happened...it's all my fault...!"

"Kin...chan, this isn't your fault!"

With that final sentence.

Shirayuki--

Closed her eyes, and submerged herself.

"Shirayuki--!"

Shirayuki's hair, inside the water--floated around, powerless.

She seemed to have resigned herself to her fate already, and she was dipping her head, not looking at me.

"Shirayuki...!"

Do you really want to die?

You want to die just so I'll leave you and go?

After dispelling the contract, you still said, "this isn't your fault," trying to protect me--

"How could this not be my fault...!"

Thump! I smashed my fist into the wall.

How could I not be in the wrong.

This is my fault.

The reason things became this way. All of it, all of it is my fault.

I didn't listen to the warnings, I didn't guard against the enemy, and I just sat around idly while things got worse--

Of course all of this is my fault!

Things have already come this far...I.

Decided something.

--Shirayuki.

You've always been very obedient to me.

Now that I think about it, everything I've said has been utterly selfish.

But now, it's time for me to hear your words.

You have three requests of me.

1. This is the one you said just now,

You said, "Live on".

Fine.

I will live on.

How could I die in this kind of place.

I will live on, and live on, and continue to live. I will defeat Durandal, and all of Aria's other enemies.

And afterward, I will return to my normal, peaceful life.

--Also.

Your second request.

You told me this. I remember. It was the night when I started being your only bodyguard.

You said, "Protect me."

At that time, we didn't know of the enemy's existence. So, what you said back then was meant to be inconsequential. However, I responded, with a "Yeah."

I have--to protect you, the final trump card--the power.

Even if I have always, always, been running away from that.

Something that I haven't even told you, my childhood friend.

But ultimately, at the end, my body still holds that final power.

During the plane-jacking, it was only partially of my own will. At that time, to escape the notice of the enemy, I sealed Aria's lips. More importantly, at that time, if I didn't change, I would die.

But, now--

The reason I choose to use this power now is not responsibility.

Aria said, I can sit this one out. Shirayuki also said, the contract to protect her is void.

So I, in terms of responsibility, if I were to run away, I would not be breaking anything.

Even if it would leave me with a lifetime of regret, I could choose not to use this power.

But, I.

For the first time since my brother died, I have decided to use this power.

I have decided to use what is hidden in my body, the final trump card--

Hysteria Mode!

Shirayuki, you said "Your contract! It's void!" right?

" Fuck that! "

I roared, sucking in a deep, deep breath.

I continued until my face turned red. Until my lungs were about to burst.
Until I could not breathe more in.

Like that, I breathed, I breathed -- I breathed in, deeply--!

Splash.

I dived.

I grabbed hold of Shirayuki's arms, which were powerless, hanging in the water.

Shirayuki's big eyes were so shocked that they opened even wider, she was shaking her head wildly inside the water.

And her eyes were blinking, giving me a flash signal.

"Don't die. Don't make up for it like this."

It seems that she thought I would prefer to have a lover's suicide with her.

...As expected of Shirayuki's thought patterns.

But, you're wrong. You're wrong, Shirayuki.

You had three requests of me.

There's still one more I haven't mentioned.

It's -- "Kiss me."

I'm sorry that I have to do it like this.

But your wish--is my command!

I only returned two words to Shirayuki, using flash signal.

"Breathe in"

After I did, I immediately--

Embraced Shirayuki.

"!"

I locked my lips with hers.

Shirayuki's lips--

I deserve to burn in hell for comparing, but compared to Aria's--it was even more gentle.

Hss. In the air that she sucked out of my mouth, a little of Shirayuki's, sweet, peach aroma was mixed in.

...Ahh.

I understand.

I understand that Shirayuki is breathing.

And--

I understand, the Kathump, Kathump...This is.

My heart, pounding.

My blood, aroused, used my lips as a starting point, and it rushed through my body--gathering at my core.

I never thought that I would do this with her, my childhood friend.

This action filled my body with excitement, gradually heating my body up.

It's as if all the time I had spent with Shirayuki, from when we were kids, was compacted into a ball of scorching heat. In my core, in my core, it burned within me, a throbbing ache--!

Aah...

I'm changing.

I'm entering, Hysteria Mode...!

Gurgle. Gurgle...Gurgle.

Air came out of Shirayuki's mouth.

She can breathe.

Our lips still together, I let her breathe once, twice--before I left.

I dived down below Shirayuki's chest, and I reached my hand towards the drum lock.

I concentrated, and re-inserted the lockpicks.

If the water reaches the ceiling, I won't even be able to go up for another breath.

From my calculations, there should be 3 minutes left--No, not even 3 minutes.

In my normal mode, picking the lock would take 12 minutes.

But, just through the feeling in my fingertips, I could understand all the workings inside the lock as if I were seeing them--

--Click--

In just 10 seconds, this lock that Aria and I had so much trouble with, was opened by me.

Number 2 was opened as well. After I had taken another breath--I gave Shirayuki some air as well, and took out the tools in the Butei Toolkit in the chest opening of her Miko outfit--

Number 3.

Click--

Following this light click, the enormous drum lock binding Shirayuki came loose.

That heavy lock slid down the wall with a rattle.

Shirayuki and I headed upwards,

--Fuah!

We surfaced at the same time.

It's a relief that I managed to do it.

Although our heads were about to hit the ceiling, the warehouse hasn't been completely submerged yet.

"Kin-chan!"

Shirayuki, splashing through the water, tightly embraced me.

"--Shirayuki. Just now, you said it. You said 'It's void'."

Ah, I'm such an idiot.

Why am I using such a deep, alluring voice.

Also, don't look at her so directly. You poser!

"Ah...Yeah."

I used my wet hands to lightly touch her cheek by her ear.

And at the same time, I used my thumb to brush away a strand of her black hair.

"This has nothing to do with the contract. I want to protect Shirayuki. Because it's Shirayuki, I want to protect you--No matter what. I hope that my burning, burning feelings...that Shirayuki will accept them."

My soft voice was like a whisper, but I was still able to say it so clearly.

Shirayuki's grateful expression took on a look of surprise--

She furiously

Nodded.

But that head, with a thud--

Smacked the ceiling.

Oh right. This isn't the time to say such sweet words.

This is a bad habit of mine after entering Hysteria Mode.

We have to go up a floor immediately.

"Bu-but, Kin-chan. The opponent is a magician, I want to fight as well."

"You're such a brave girl."

Seeing Shirayuki's eyebrows shoot up, I chuckled.

Although I don't wish to let Shirayuki get into any more danger, it isn't a good idea to go against a woman's determination.

"I hope it doesn't happen--but, if I am really unable to handle it, you can help. Aria and I are fronts. Shirayuki is--support. We're counting on you to give us all you have."

Alright, I've played all my cards.

Right now I have to meet up with Aria, assault, and--
capture that unseen agent--Durandal.

The opponent is a tactician, and also an ability user. A normal Butei can't match her.

But, we are far from normal Butei. We have Quadra Aria, the me in Hysteria Mode, and Shirayuki in support.

With these three cards--even if the opponent is Durandal, we definitely match her. No, we are above her in power.

I was thinking this while pushing this on the emergency valve leading to the upper floor.

The water had pretty much reached the ceiling by now.

Clank. I opened the triple-layered steel valve, and to avoid being sneak attacked, I used my knife as a mirror to look at the situation above. It should be fine. When I had just thought this--the door appeared to have a device attached to it--Rumble. A muffled explosion tore through the entire underground warehouse.

"...Kch!"

The water suddenly rose.

My submerged eyes scanned the extent of the roof to the floor. The raging torrent forced us onto the floor of the level above.

"Kyaa--!"

Shirayuki, forced onto level 6, slid on the slippery ground with a "Kyaa!"

"--Be careful, Shirayuki! Take out your secondary sword!"

"Ah...Yes."

I wanted to go after Shirayuki, who had been flushed into the darkness--but right now, the most important thing is to stop the flow of water.

Unable to let go of the valve, I tried to close it against that enormous amount of pressure.

"Uu...NNGGHHH!"

I used all my strength to push the door, and with a *Thump* It finally closed.

Fu...

I finally--sealed the water.

If I were in Normal Mode, there's no way I'd be able to do this.

"--Shirayuki."

There was no answer.

"..."

You can't mean that...

She noticed the enemy's tracks, and now she's trying to avoid detection.

After all, Shirayuki's role now is support.

I looked around the level, the water already around my feet--forming countless walls was a huge computer, the HPC server--it's known as the supercomputer room.

Emergency lights were constantly flashing, all around me.

But...there were no signs with 'Danger' or 'Caution'.

I drew my Beretta and ejected the magazine, blowing out the water that had permeated the gun.

The current generation of guns won't become unable to fire just because a little water got in.

I was feeling a little sorry for Informa and Connect, but the ban on my gun had lifted.

The supercomputer components were like a barrier. Basically, it formed a maze.

Although I don't need to be as cautious about things flying towards me around corners, I can't be sure of the enemy's location.

In the corridor formed by wires and silicon--I lightened my footfalls, and ran.

I raised my gun as we were taught in interior-combat classes, and moved like soldiers in the special forces.

Two, three--

I stayed cautious while turning corners, keeping to the walls.

"--Kinji."

I met up with Aria.

She appeared to have heard our voices, and returned from within the elevator room.

"I'm glad you're alright..."

I lowered my gaze, and put my gun to one side.

Aria, seeming to feel extremely guilty about leaving the warehouse first, saw that I was alright, and her face relaxed.

However, once she reached my side, she looked up at me with her Eichornia eyes.

"--Why didn't you run. I said you could 'sit this one out', right?"

She softly rebuked me for going against her orders.

"I'm not as irresponsible as to leave the cute maiden, Aria, by herself."

"...Wh-what's that supposed to mean?"

Grr. Seeing Aria bare her canines as usual, I relaxed, and answered,

"Once I thought that Aria might want to see me--I couldn't stop myself from coming."

"We-we-we're already in this kind of situation, and you say that?"

On my face was a smile worthy of Shiranui, making Aria breathe in and out, her cheeks reddening as usual.

The time from normal to full-blush was a mere 0.5 seconds.
Congratulations on your new record, Aria.

"Nevermind that, Aria, where's Durandal?"

"...I haven't found her yet. That coward doesn't have the guts to face me."

"--Is that so."

"However, I can confirm that she's hiding in this room. The locks on all the doors leading up are broken, and the elevator doors are sealed. Also, this was all done from inside."

Aria, concentrating again, explained the situation to me. It looks like she really hasn't faced the enemy yet.

"Oh right, I heard her voice just now...Shirayuki was saved too, right? She isn't hurt, is she?"

Looks like Aria really was worried about us, so she confirmed the situation with me.

She really is a good girl. She has such a heavy sense of responsibility.

"Yes. But, we got split up just now. If we split up, we'll be walking into the enemy's trap. We have to rejoin Shirayuki."

I had just spoke, when—

--Ku, Ku Ku

—I heard a weak coughing noise.

It was a soft noise that even the me in Hysteria Mode could barely hear, but Aria, who seemed to have the senses of an animal, turned her head around.

"It's Shirayuki. She's over there."

"Let's go. But, Durandal might attack. Aria, I'll be your shield,"

I said, stepping in front of Aria, going towards the noise.

As I brushed past her, I saw something out of the corner of my eye--

Aria's camellia eyes opened wide, as if she had noticed something about me.

We found Shirayuki immediately.

She was in the only clearing in the HPC server room, the elevator lobby.

She had wandered into one of the roads by it, hiding in the shadow of one of the computers, nearly 3 meters tall.

Thump. Shirayuki was lying on the floor like a mermaid--

She probably ingested some seawater as she was carried by the current, and she was grasping her neck and coughing.

"...Ku, Ku ku...Wh-where's the enemy...?"

"We haven't found her yet. Shirayuki, don't leave us."

Shirayuki nodded her head at Aria, who was bending down.

"Kin-chan..."

Shirayuki raised her head, and directed that half-weak, half-happy gaze at me.

Her soaked Miko garments were stuck to her body, exposing those sensual curves that a high-schooler should not have.

The me in Hysteria Mode could remember the form, color, material, as well as every little decoration as if I had taken a photo of it with my mind.

But--today, Shirayuki was not wearing that black underwear, and instead she seemed to be wearing thin armor.

"Just now, I didn't hurt your lips, did I?"

"No, you didn't."

I carelessly asked, making Shirayuki nod heavily.

"It's bleeding, isn't it. Let me see."

"There's no need. It's not serious, the skin just broke a little."

--So that's it--!

"Aria, run!"

While shouting, I fired at Shirayuki.

Shirayuki--seemed to have predicted this, and *Pa*--!

"!"

She used her wet sleeves to knock aside my hand, dodging the first bullet.

The bullet, hitting the floor, ricocheted and hit one of the huge computers, raising a shower of sparks.

"Kinji!?"

Shirayuki moved with a speed that normal eyes couldn't follow, quickly turning towards Aria.

Bang! Bang Bang Bang!

The Beretta that I had switched to burst-fire roared.

But, the bullets only hit the hem of her hakama.

Shirayuki took advantage of this situation and she bent down, sweeping around Aria until she was at her back.

And with a scraping noise, she drew the sword she had hidden under the computer.

Appearing from within the scabbard she had dropped in the lobby, was the katana that Shirayuki normally carried around with her.

But this Shirayuki--I could no longer attack her.

Because she was already using Aria as a body shield.

Aria was still unable to grasp the situation, but it seems that her animal-like senses allowed her to sense the danger.

"--!?"

Her hands drew her guns by reflex, preparing to turn around to face Shirayuki.

But her neck--

"Uu!?"

was grabbed by Shirayuki, her left arm snaking in from behind.

And in her right hand was the drawn blade, just--below Aria's ear, by her neck.

The Carotid artery.

If it's even cut a few millimeters, it will spurt out blood till the victim dies off blood loss. All within a few seconds. It is one of the most vulnerable spots on the body.

"Shira...yuki! What are you doing! What's going on!"

Shirayuki facing Aria, who was still holding on to one of her guns in her right hand--

Fu!

And blew across her right shoulder.

"Uwaah!"

Aria convulsed as if she had been struck by a branding iron.

And that fearsome M1911 dropped from her nerveless fingers.

Patter...Clatter.

The silver gun, having fallen, was quickly covered by water.

"Aria! No!"

I shouted.

"--That isn't Shirayuki!"

--Fu!

Shirayuki blew at Aria's left hand this time.

"Kyaa!?"

Aria, jerked forwards once again, and that jet black M1911 was released at well, her hands flying to her bosom.

Her hands--as if frosted, were covered by a layer of ice.

This supernatural scene filled my body with an instinctive fear.

Just now--the person that did this, was this Shirayuki.

Using her ability!

"--You're merely ordinary."

That voice was no longer that of Shirayuki's.

"Yet you dare challenge ability users. How foolish."

My senses...noticed that she was strange.

Because Shirayuki didn't listen to me. I told her to draw her secondary sword, but instead, she sat there coughing non-stop, holding nothing.

So, to confirm it, I asked her "I didn't hurt your lips, right?" wanting to see her reaction.

And just now--if it was the real Shirayuki, who knew what had transpired underwater, there's no way she would have remained calm, saying "No you didn't."

And, Shirayuki's lips weren't hurt at all.

Yet, she said that they were.

Forcing me to go to those lengths to confirm--this fake Shirayuki really look alike.

You could say they look exactly the same.

If I wasn't in Hysteria Mode, where my senses are heightened several times above normal, this Shirayuki, my childhood friend, would have completely tricked me. I would have died by her hands.

"...Durandal...!"

Aria, finally noticing her real identity, shook her hands, screaming.

"--Don't call me by that name. That name which others have given me, I don't like it."

"You...know my name, right! I am, Kanzaki Holmes Aria! Of the years that mother is charged with, 107 of them--are yours! I'll have you carry that sentence yourself!"

"Is that really something you should say in this situation?"

Fu. Durandal sneered at Aria, who was in her mercy.

"Anyways, your name--at most, it has 150 years of history, isn't it shameful to announce it like that? The history of my bloodline reaches much farther back than yours--It stretches 600 years, the history of the light."

Afterward, that face, still assuming Shirayuki's appearance, seemed to think Aria was laughable and she squinted, putting her lips by Aria's ear.

"So that's how it is, you're a Quadra, hmm?--It's as Lupin the 4th said."

Just now...she said the name, Lupin the 4th.

--That's Riko.

As expected, this girl is--the Butei Killer's, Mine Riko Lupin the 4th's, ally.

I also thought that, without Riko's expertise, there's no way she could have disguised herself so perfectly.

"Aria. My great ancestor--the first Jeanne d'Arc, you're very similar to her. Both of you look so beautiful and cute, but inside, they were ferocious and brave--"

"Jeanne d'Arc...!?"

Aria savored these words.

(...Did she say, Jeanne d'Arc...!?)

Even I know that name. It's taught in History classes all around the world.

That was in the 15th century, the girl that led the French against the English during the Hundred Years War, the Holy Maiden of France. But her words just now implied that she was a descendant of that Jeanne.

...But...

The 'Durandal' before my eyes could not be a descendant of Jeanne d'Arc.

Because no matter what one says, the ultimate fate of the Holy Maiden of Orleans was--

"You're lying! Jeanne d'Arc was burned to death...she died before she had reached her twenties! It's impossible that she might have any descendants!"

"That was a fake."

Ku. She laughed at Aria again.

"My bloodline is that of tacticians. She might have pretended to be a Holy Maiden, but in reality she was a Witch. We've always hidden the truth in the shadow of history, passing down the knowledge of that glorified name. And also, I'm the thirtieth. Jeanne d'Arc--the thirtieth."

Durandal--

If I believe what she says, she is Jeanne d'Arc.

"As you mentioned, my ancestor nearly died to the flames. So from then on, each generation has been testing this power."

Jeanne's hand reached towards Aria's thigh like a poisonous snake--and Aria's body shook once more from the pain.

"Kyaa!"

I could see a layer of ice on Aria's knee.

There's no doubt about it.

She's different from us regular Butei, she has powers beyond our imagination!

"Come with me, Aria. You, who were able to wound Lupin the 4th, come with me. Unless you'd like--to die? But in that event, I've already planned ahead."

"...Aria...!"

I switched my Beretta to single-shot and aimed at Jeanne's head, threatening her--But, there's no way I could open fire.

Butei Law article 9.

「Regardless of the situation, a Butei cannot kill」.

And after I opened fire, I just now understood. Her Miko garments are bulletproof. And apart from her head, the only thing that is exposed is her hand, holding the knife. However, if I fire at it, I'll hit Aria in the head.

That girl knows this, that's why she's standing like this.

What do I do?

Facing my frowning face was Jeanne--still keeping Shirayuki's appearance, smirking.

"Being able to see through my disguise, this isn't the normal you. I'm not able to fight with you evenly...but, your weakness right now is, 'female hostages', right?"

As expected of--a self-proclaimed tactician.

She's investigated that as well.

"Tohyama. If you dare to move, I will freeze Aria. Aria cannot move as well. If you do, I will freeze the part you move, without fail."

Hearing her, my heart was anguished.

She's right, the me in Hysteria Mode will place the safety of girls first and foremost.

"Kinji...Quickly, fire...!"

Where would you like me to fire, Aria.

The me as of right now could not possibly do it...!

"You said something, didn't you Aria? That means your mouth moved. I'm sure we won't need this venomous tongue."

Whoosh. Jeanne firmly drew the hand holding the blade across Aria's jaw--

And brought her own lips towards Aria's mouth.

--She's going to blow inside her mouth!

"Stop!"

I shouted, but I could do nothing.

If Aria is taken hostage, there's nothing I can...

"--Aria!"

A voice that didn't belong to me echoed within the room.

That normally humble and weak voice.

--Was now brave and full of power--

Kch! From behind Jeanne, the 3 meter tall computer, chains started snaking outward, wrapping around--while pressing against Aria's jaw, it had loosened--the hand that held the knife.

With a *Pa!*, the blade by Aria's neck was flung away.

"--!?"

Jeanne, still holding Shirayuki's appearance frowned, looking up towards the computer--

"Kin-chan, save Aria!"

Standing there was the real Shirayuki!

Shirayuki, well done!

Holding up the chains, she snatched the knife from the hands of the impostor.

And from the top of the computer, she caught the knife.

Just now, Aria saved Shirayuki--but now, it's Shirayuki saving Aria.

Butei Law Charter 1. 「Believe in your comrades and help each other」.

These two people, who can find a way to raise hell over divination, actually start helping each other when a real situation arises--

Aria, Shirayuki.

Both of you are excellent Butei! Your tolerance is legendary!

The real Shirayuki descended--

Clank!

As if inserting herself between Aria and Jeanne, she slashed downwards.

Jeanne reacted immediately. She raised the resistant Miko garments, trying to block the blade with her sleeve.

But this movement was completely negated by Aria.

Aria, in the second she was released, bent forward, using her uninjured leg to strike Jeanne in the kneecap.

Jeanne's balance was completely destroyed, and she could only take a step back.

--My eyes under Hysteria Mode took in this 1-second exchange.

And I rushed forward to catch Aria, who was falling due to that maneuver.

Shirayuki, as if protecting Aria, stood in front of her.

Whoosh. Shirayuki raised her sword gracefully, pointing it towards the disguised Jeanne--

"Shirayuki--I never thought that you'd risk your life like this just to save Aria."

Saying this, from Jeanne's garments, meant to match Shirayuki's Miko hakama, something like a canister fell out.

Hiss-----! The white smoke emitted by the canister permeated the room, blocking all vision.

A canister releasing smoke--a smokescreen!

Beep.

Chi, Chi.

The automatic sprinklers on the ceiling detected the smoke, and started pouring out water.

Shirayuki, as if trying to evade the smoke that was released, stepped backward quickly.

"I'm sorry, Kin-chan. Just now I thought I'd be able to finish her...I didn't think she'd be able to escape."

"You did very well, as expected of Shirayuki. Aria, are you alright?"

"I...I miscalculated this time. I didn't think that there would be two Shirayukis..."

Aria, clutching her body, was trying to extend her hand.

There's no way she can fight, right?--I'm afraid that that was Jeanne's goal from the start.

And also...it might just be me, but I felt the room become colder.

"Shirayuki--can you remember two things for me?"

"Un."

"Do you remember placing a piano wire in Aria's wardrobe?"

"Wardrobe...? I definitely didn't do anything like that."

"And one more thing. Shirayuki, before, were you seen by Shiranui while doing the flower divination?"

"Hnh, ah, yeah..."

Hearing Shirayuki's embarrassed answer, I couldn't help but wrinkle my eyebrows.

"At the same time, I met another Shirayuki. So it seems that that girl was dressed up as Shirayuki all along, infiltrating Butei High. That's why she could observe us so closely--and break us apart. Aria. I'm afraid that the person who put that piano wire inside your wardrobe was Jeanne. You remember the steel wires from below, right? One can hide a tree in a forest--she used the hostility between you and Shirayuki, and placed a death trap."

Seeing me explain my reasoning so clearly--Aria's camellia eyes widened.

"Kinji...you...changed again...right?"

--That's right.

The me as of now is in Hysteria Mode.

Which from your point of view is, Awakened Mode.

I didn't answer, confirming Aria's question.

I'm not sure whether Aria gained some confidence knowing this, but she suddenly bared her canines and shouted,

"Durandal! --You said that you're Jeanne d'Arc? You cheap scumbag! You're nothing like your ancestor!"

From another direction of the smoke, from some place pretty far away--

"You're the same as me. Holmes the 4th."

There was a voice, answering Aria's taunts.

The place that was 'pretty far away', was the elevator lobby.

We had just spun around, rushing towards it--when we suddenly noticed.

It wasn't just me. The temperature in this room was decreasing rapidly.

From the within the mist, the water came down from the sprinklers, crystallizing in the air, floating like snowflakes.

This phenomenon was that of ice crystallization.

It was as if jewels were floating through the air, a breathtakingly beautiful scene.

But for us, this revelation struck a chord of terror within us.

That girl is--A witch, of diamond dust--

"Kin-chan...you protect Aria. Aria won't be able to fight for a while."

Shirayuki held her sword in front of her and backed up a few steps--then kneeled on the floor with one knee.

Her left hand was holding Aria's right hand.

"The witch's ice is like a poison. The only thing that can purify it is a priestess or--Miko. However, this ice is ranked from G6-G8, an extremely high power ice. With my abilities, I can heal it, but to return to normal...it would probably take at least 5 minutes. So during this time, protect her, Kin-chan. I'll take the enemy by myself."

"--What are you saying, Shirayuki. How could I let you fight by yourself?"

I continued to stay alert in case Jeanne attacked, and I stood in a position where I could protect the both of them.

"Kin-chan...you saying this makes me very happy. But now, please leave it to me, a Choutei. Aria, this will...hurt a lot. But, with this you'll be healed, so please endure the pain."

Saying this, Shirayuki started reciting a mantra or incantation.

She's probably concentrating.

An unseen power transferred from Shirayuki's hands to Aria's.

"...Ahh...! Uu...!"

It appears that accompanying Shirayuki's healing is agony, but Aria, not wanting to give our location to the enemy, endured the heavy pain, not making a sound.

The me in Hysteria Mode could not bear those moans any longer, and I turned my head around.

"Uu!"

Aria, biting on her sleeve, moaning, tossed her head back in agony.

Her fringe was tossed up as well, revealing the--X-shaped scar hiding below.

That was the scar that Aria received last month protecting me.

On a cute girl's face, it was a irremovable, eternal scar.

--Pain shot through my chest.

To the side, Shirayuki, finishing Aria's healing, retrieved something like a postcard from her sleeve.

She then placed it on one of the computers--and the surroundings warmed up.

Looking closely, it was a rectangular piece of Japanese paper, a charm with camellia Kanji and symbols covering its surface.

Under my discerning gaze, Shirayuki quickly stood up.

And Shirayuki walked towards the frozen mist, and as if it was a demon being exorcised, it wafted away from her.

I hadn't noticed until now, but our clothes were dried already.

Was this also due to an ability?

"Shirayuki..."

Seeing this scene, I made my decision.

I didn't want to let Shirayuki fight alone.

But.

There's no way I could leave Aria by herself.

--I'll leave this battle to Shirayuki, an ability user, just like Jeanne. After all, that is her own wish.

Seeing me back away a bit, towards Aria, Shirayuki--

"Jeanne."

Stepped forward, putting her body in front of Aria and me.

"You...surrender. I don't wish to hurt anybody. Even if it's someone like you."

Shirayuki clearly announced her intentions, but from within the mist we could hear a soft chuckle, going "Heh."

"You're laughable. An uncut diamond like you could never hurt me, who has received I-U's training."

"I am a G17 ability user."

This time--

We could hear a clear laugh coming from within the mist.

I don't really understand, but it appears that what Shirayuki said is earth-shattering for ability users.

"--Don't try and bluff me. I can count on my fingers, the number of G17 ability users in the world."

"You must have felt it too. When the Hotogi seal...was released from this cloth."

"...Even if what you say is true,"

Jeanne's voice seemed to be a little more panicked.

"There's no way you would betray the Hotogi. I'm sure you understand what that means."

"Jeanne--Finally, the tactician will die in the midst of her own schemes."

Shirayuki's voice become stronger.

"The person you're talking about is the one I've always been, the normal me. But the me as of now could not care less about any restrictions the Hotogi placed on me, I would break them all without a second thought--the only existence that can make me do that is standing by my side. It's you who doesn't know about the strength of my feelings."

Hearing Shirayuki's extraordinary words, Jeanne--fell silent.

Those who rely on plans, find unexpected things extremely hard to react to.

And now, the enemy's plan has one major flaw.

Because, this is a different Shirayuki than the one before.

The temperature has already returned to normal.

The smoke released from the smokescreen has already dispersed, and the sprinklers stopped, one by one.

"Then, let's find out. I've already predicted the possibility of a direct engagement. The higher G the Choutei is, the faster her spiritual energy wanes. If I can hold on, the victory will belong to me."

Jeanne, seemingly having reached a decision, was in another side of the dispersing smoke...

Finally, she stepped out and revealed herself.

The body, having already removed the hakama and all the Miko garments--as expected--was Western armor, covering sections of her body.

"Those restricting clothes that Lupin the 4th made for me are useless now."

Shii. The face that appeared from beneath the thin layer of smoke--

Those eyes, as slender and sharp as a sword edge, were like beautiful sapphires.

And her hair, formed into two strands, each a triple-braid, was a shining silver reminiscent of ice.

Totally contradictory to her ancient manner of speaking Japanese, Jeanne d'Arc was a foreigner with beauty akin to those stars in Hollywood.

"Kin-chan, starting now...don't look at me."

Her back still facing me, Shirayuki's voice trembled a little.

"...Shirayuki...?"

"Right now, I'm going to use Hotogi's heavenly arts. If Kin-chan sees me right now, you'll definitely think...that I'm terrifying. You'll think that...I can't stand it. You'll...hate me."

Saying this, Shirayuki placed her hand on the white ribbon on top of her hair.

Those fingers were also trembling slightly.

While stepping back half a step, I...

"Shirayuki--don't worry. There's only one thing that I cannot do."

For the sake of guarding against the battle that would soon erupt between the two Choutei, I stood in a position where I could protect Aria.

"I'll start to hate you? This is the only thing that I could not possibly do."

As if spurred onwards by my low voice-

Whoosh.



Her face, forcing a smile, turned around to look at me, and she released the white ribbon tied to her hair.

"I'll be right back."

And with a *Thud*, her wooden slippers moved forward. She raised her sword again.

But that stance--was different from her normal appearance.

Only her right hand was holding the hilt, close to the guard. As if showing it off, she raised the flat of her sword above her head.

It was an extremely strange stance that belonged to no school of swordsmanship.

"Jeanne. I won't hold back anymore."

"--?"

"I'm about to show you that which is hidden within the Hotogi Mikos, the sealed Kidoujutsu. We, like you, have been continually carrying on the name of our ancestor. Aria has 150 years. You have 600 years. And as for us...we have had 2000, long, long years..."

Clack--I thought that Shirayuki had clenched her sword--

The front of the sword, with a vibration, erupted into a camellia flame.

And as I watched, the flame flared up and covered the entire blade.

Lighting up the room, was an inferno--!

With this, I could not possibly think that the flame was caused by oil, or even a device releasing gas.

That--that was real.

Shirayuki's trump card, her special ability!

"'Shirayuki' is merely a fake name meant to hide my real one. My forbidden name, my real name is--'Himiko'^[8]."

As she finished speaking, Thud!

Shirayuki kicked off the ground, bursting towards Jeanne like a rocket.

Jeanne, stunned for a moment by Shirayuki's display of her ability, suddenly bent down, Clank!

She used an exquisitely crafted Western blade, hidden behind her back, to deflect Shirayuki's full-force blow.

Ching! The blades collided--Jewel-like ice crystals flew off where there should have been sparks, scattering while being melted in that ferocious heat--

Shi--Shirayuki's deflected blade sheared through the computer beside her effortlessly, and without so much as a sound, she cut it in half.

Tap! Jeanne quickly put some distance between Shirayuki and herself.

She's obviously retreating--!

"Inferno...!"

On that breathtakingly beautiful face, an expression of filled with mixed fear and apprehension appeared.

The me in Hysteria Mode was able to understand.

She's afraid of fire.

Just now she said, the bloodline of Jeanne started exploring their capabilities because their ancestor was nearly burned to death.

And the reason they did so, was most definitely because they were afraid.

Each generation of that bloodline, due to the fear they felt, started researching their secret art, ice.

"That attack just now was one of the special arts of the Hotogi, Hinokagabi^[9]. And next, is Hinokagutsuchi^[10]--Your sword, I will shatter it."

Shirayuki once again brought that blazing blade to her head.

It was as if she was holding a sword made of flame.

So that's how it is, this stance was created for the purpose of keeping Shirayuki's flames from hurting herself.

"This is the end. There's nothing that my Irokaneayame cannot cut."

"That's my line. My holy sword Durandal can cut anything."

Jeanne, facing off against Shirayuki, seemed to be focusing all the courage in her body into the broadsword.

It's an ancient, yet awe-inspiring Western broadsword.

The sapphire embedded into the guard of the sword shined in the blazing light of Shirayuki's inferno.

Step! Shirayuki leaped forward once again--

But from my point of view, she was rushing for the win.

Ching! King! Their swords continued to clash, raising an unimaginable clamor.

Everything that Shirayuki's and Jeanne's blades touched were ripped apart like they were made of paper.

The gigantic computers, as well as the shelves holding them, the bulletproof elevator doors, the concrete floors, walls...everything.

But, there were still two things that had not been cut.

It was Shirayuki's blade, Irokaneayame, and Jeanne's holy sword, Durandal.

Those flashing blades, able to cut everything they contacted, after numerous exchanges and clashes, were still completely unmarred.

"This is...a battle of elite Choutei...!"

By my side was Aria, raising her head in shock.

"Aria."

I bent down, and asked her softly,

"Can you move?"

"I should...I'm nearly fine. But my gun is frozen to the floor, and even if I managed to remove it, it would be unusable. My guns are not resistant to frost. If I don't take it apart and maintain it, I won't be able to use it."

Aria regretfully dipped her head to look at the M1911, sealed to the floor by the ice.

"Let's make a plan."

Hearing my words, Aria, who normally worked alone, raised her head--violently.

And then she nodded.

Looks like the me in Hysteria Mode is a trusted partner for her.

"--We may wish to help Shirayuki, but if we don't help at the right opportunity, we will only hinder her. Aria, you said that you've captured ability users like Jeanne before, right? Is there a way to exploit one of her weaknesses?"

"Ability users as powerful as this...to be honest, I've never met them before. But, this battle...I don't think they'll be able to sustain this for a long time."

"Unsustainable for a long time?"

"The more powerful an ability user is, the faster their spiritual energy depletes. They use minimal amounts of energy when clashing with Butei...but when they meet one of their own kind, they will go all out, as demonstrated here. Therefore, their spiritual energy should not last much longer. At that time, we will strike."

"Are you able to recognize that moment?"

"From my experience, I should be able to. However, most of it is just instinct. Do you trust me?"

Aria's voice seemed to be a little uneasy,



My heart full of shame, I straightened my body, and gently patted her pink hair.

"Recently, I've been a complete idiot. Can you forgive me? I swear--as long as I live, I will trust you."

"A-as long as you live?"

"There might not be anybody in the world that trusts you, but as long as I live, I will stand beside you."

I looked into her camellia eyes, pouring out my deepest feelings...

Her face was already red, almost the same color as her twin-tails, but at that moment, Aria's...

cheeks turned a color akin to ripened strawberries, and she blushed even deeper.

Because her surprised face seemed to be pleased, I-

"Are you happy?"

"...Idiot Kinji...! Yo-you...even when you're in your Awakened Mode, you're still an idiot...idiot...!"

"Tell me. I want to know what you really feel."

I asked her this.

".....I-I'm...a little happy. Bu-but only a little!"

"If Aria is happy, then I'm happy as well. Then Aria, will you trust me?"

".....Uuu, Un."

Finally, Aria's gaze, like a child looking at an adult, met mine, and she nodded furiously.

It seems that she already feels that way about the me in Hysteria Mode.

"Then, we have faith in each other."

Hearing my decisive words, Aria's heart seemed to have been shaken, and she brought her lightly closed hands to her chest.

"With that, I hope that you can trust in yourself, and tell me the time to strike. Together, let's--capture Durandal."

During the time when Aria and I had newly re-established our trust--

Now...where Shirayuki had always had the advantage in the battle of flame against ice, for the first time, she seemed to be struggling with the opponent.

"--!"

Shirayuki's breathing seemed like it was just about to stop, and she gritted her teeth, charging forward with the sword in her hands.

Under this blow, with the full weight of her body behind it, Jeanne, with a *Thump*, was finally forced to the ground, falling against the wall.

But...

"Haa, Haa, Haa...!"

Shirayuki was already extremely exhausted. As if trying to prove that Shirayuki was nearly unable to breathe, the blade, wreathed in flames, was getting dimmer and dimmer.

"Throw your sword away, Jeanne--You, have, lost."

"Heh...Hehe."

Following Jeanne's chuckle, directed at no-one--Chi.

In a flash, ice particles appeared around her, moving like a thin mist.

Being hidden by that mist, she ducked under Shirayuki with a spinning movement.

Shirayuki tried to slash diagonally, but her blade, losing its flame--

Crashed into the wall with a 'Kch', and stopped.

It was obvious.

Shirayuki has already used up all her energy--in these few minutes.

Aria was right.

Choutei are very strong. They have powers beyond a human's imagination. But, they are not good in extended battles.

The same goes for magic in RPGs. Those characters that are able to use devastating magic attacks--but once their mana runs out--

"Haa, Haa...Haa."

Shirayuki, still grasping the hilt of the blade with her right hand, fell to her knees.

She seemed to be as tired as somebody who had just finished running a marathon.

Clank. The blade still sticking into the wall, fell onto the ground, and Shirayuki's left hand felt the ground next to her for the sheathe...Chiiii, and for some reason, she sheathed the blade.

"How naive--you're as simpleminded as a rock. Not attacking my body, and only aiming for my sword. Breaking my holy sword, Durandal--is absolutely impossible."

Jeanne appeared to have regained her composure, and she pointed the edge of Durandal towards Shirayuki.

Has it not arrived...Aria, has it not arrived?

The moment where I can strike, has it not arrived?

"Ku...!"

I saw Shirayuki, who appeared to be hiding the sheathed blade behind her body, grit her teeth.

Shirayuki--!

I couldn't take it any longer, and was about to rush in when Aria grasped my hand.

"Not yet, Kinji...! Shirayuki still has it in her for one final blow...! It takes time to use her abilities...and I think...she's focusing her power right now...!"

Aria, whispering this to me, seemed to be convincing herself with those words as well.

Around Jeanne, who was raising her sword, ice crystals once again appeared, and they continued to float around her.

Also, within the blink of an eye, they swept over the room like a blizzard.

That bitter cold once again decreased the temperature of the room below freezing point--!

"Let's go, 'Fleur de la glace d'Orleans'^[11]--become diamond dust, and dance--!"

Behind the cloud of glittering ice crystals, Durandal, still in Jeanne's grasp, started to accumulate a blinding white light.

--Now--!

"Kinji, follow after 3 seconds!"

shouted Aria, Whoosh!

She drew the two wakizashis from her back, and rushed forward, just like a bullet.

--1 second.

Jeanne, focusing on battling Shirayuki, turned her head with an "Ah."

--2 seconds.

"A mere Butei dares to interfere!"

Jeanne gave into the cold fury gripping her, and she swung her sword diagonally, but quicker than that--

Aria used the tip of her blade to hook the Miko garments that Jeanne had tossed aside just now--Pa!

Those clothes, flying through the air, blocked the enemy's line of sight.

"--!"

Shi--! Aria continued sliding down on the ground like a football, curling up.

Still, Jeanne didn't stop.

But Aria, seemingly with an Aikido technique, predicted her enemy's movements and acted on it.

Kch!!

The flow of aquamarine light, caught the Miko garments--from above Aria's head--into its deathly embrace.

This really is like a scene from an RPG.

She formed the glinting ice crystals into a vortex, and she furiously fired it towards the ceiling.

The ceiling appeared to have sprouted a colossal ice flower, and it was completely frozen.

--3 seconds!

"Kinji, now! Jeanne can't use her ability anymore!"

I don't need to be reminded.

I slid on the frost on the floor, speeding forward.

Bang Bang Bang!

I fired my Beretta, which had been already switched to 3-burst fire, towards Jeanne's center.

Jeanne immediately pulled Durandal back, deflecting the 3 bullets.

But I had predicted that already. Because she's a master swordsman that's able to fight evenly with Shirayuki.

I--continued to pick up speed as I slid, preparing to enter close combat with Jeanne.

Contact gunfights--I had practiced this when I was in Assault.

We may have used riot shields during the practice--but, as long as the enemy has a way to defend against bullets, this method is useful. It focuses on using a hail of bullets to cause multiple impacts, overpowering the enemy.

"You're just a Butei!"

At that moment, Jeanne charged towards me, unexpectedly.

Aria's twin blades struck towards her feet.

Pa! Jeanne, having already predicted this, leaped over her attack, rushing down at me furiously.

Not only was she able to use the flat of her blade to deflect my bullets, but she also twisted the edge at an angle, coming directly at my head.

"--!"

That kind of superhuman move...didn't you lose your magic already?

And this slice was far faster than I thought.

Durandal's arc had nearly reached my head--

--at that moment.

For the me in Hysteria Mode,

Everything was moving in slow motion.

Methods of negating this danger...

There's still one.

That technique requires use of both hands.

But, I can't let go of my gun in the right hand.

If I were to compare this with chess, that gun in my right hand was the key piece of my entire strategy.

So with my unrestricted left hand, I--

"----!"

Caught the holy sword, Durandal.

--I used Edge Catching--

--Single Hand Version.

As the blade was speeding towards me, I found it extremely difficult. However, I managed to pull it off.

This is thanks to Hysteria Mode, as well as the training that Aria had been giving me.

"--!"

Thud--!

Jeanne, still holding on to Durandal, fell to my side.

"...How could there be, someone like this..."

Jeanne, seeing that her beloved blade was caught between my forefinger and middle finger...as I thought, still didn't lose her fighting spirit.

I kept holding her sword with my left hand, and pointed my gun at her neck with my right hand.

"--This is over, Jeanne. It would be a lot easier for all of us if you were obedient,"

I said, as if reprimanding a child--

"Butei Law article 9."

Jeanne responded.

I glanced away for a moment, chuckling.

She's right.

If I wish to keep Butei Law, I cannot attack her head.

"I haven't forgotten. Butei cannot kill people."

"Haha. You really are an amazingly intelligent young lady^[12]."

"Y-Young lady...?"

I'm not sure whether she was embarrassed by this name, but Jeanne's face reddened.

"Bu...But, I'm not a Butei!"

she said, while putting more pressure on the sword.

Stop it already, young lady.

I already told you.

This match has been decided.

"Why?", you might ask--

Tap! Tap Tap Tap--!

In the wake of the continuous footfalls of wooden slippers--

"I'm not going to let you attack Kin-chan!!"

Shirayuki yelled, rushing towards us--inserting herself between Jeanne and I, right where Durandal was.

--Hihi No Hotogikami^[13]--!"

The blade, still sheathed, tore out of the scabbard with a ferocious scrape.

Crimson light flashed from within the scabbard, and brought along by the blade, it split Durandal.

A vortex of flame, looking like a gigantic flaming-tracer bullet, flared up, unstoppable, towards the ceiling--

Bang-----!!

The ice on the ceiling shattered into a thousand pieces, as if it had been hit by a grenade launcher!

Fuah...Fuah...

In the midst of the falling fragments, Jeanne's mouth fell open, completely stunned that Durandal had been broken.

".....!"

This was the final scene that lay before us.

It made Jeanne, who had no idea how to react to the situation, widen those sapphire-like eyes.

And stand there, in a daze.

"Durandal^[14]!"

And suddenly, a shrill voice--Click!

rang out, handcuffing Jean's right hand.

"Uu--!?"

Jeanne looked at her own hand, at the handcuffs made especially for ability users.

I shouldn't need to say this.

This was the silver handcuffs that Aria bought on her first day as Shirayuki's bodyguard.

"You're under arrest!!"

Aria bounded over like a predator, Click! And clasped the handcuff over her left wrist as well.

I--

"Didn't I say so? 'It would be a lot easier for all of us if you were obedient'."

I turned around and picked up the top half of the fragmented Durandal, removing it from the sight of Jeanne, who was in the process of getting her feet handcuffed by Aria.

She, as opposed to her behaviour--is like Aria, a well known young lady.

But, that confidence led to her capture.

Jeanne. Even as the end drew near, you still underestimated Aria and I--You underestimated us as just 'Butei'.

That is the sole reason for your defeat.

Because the Butei here are me in Hysteria Mode, as well as--Holmes the 4th in Partner Acquired Mode, Quadra Aria. We are by no means, just Butei.

Fu, I exhaled lightly...

And walked over to Shirayuki, who was lying down, exhausted, in the middle of the debris.

Shirayuki, meeting my gaze, quickly sheathed the blade, panicking a little.

"Kin-Kin-chan."

It looks like the first thing she's going to do is apologize.

I raised my forefinger, conveying "You shouldn't say that, right?"

"...Thank...Thank you."

Thank you?

I'll count it as a pass.

"Shirayuki. You did really well. The only reason we could capture Durandal--is Shirayuki's hard work."

"You....You...You aren't scared?"

"Scared of what?"

"Ju...Just now, my...that, that kind of thing..."

Shirayuki said, those smooth black eyes tearing up under her fringe.

It looks like she thinks that I'd be scared after seeing her ability.

Haha.

So she's worried about this kind of thing.

I, laughing gently, said to Shirayuki, who had an expression saying "You don't hate me...right?"

"How could I be scared. That was an extremely beautiful, extremely powerful flame. It was far more beautiful than the fireworks we saw before."

"Kin-chan...Uu...Uwaah..."

Shirayuki couldn't help but start crying, and she hugged me tightly--

I returned the hug, gently patting her back.

No matter how long, I will stay with you.

Until you calm down from being a crybaby.

I will always gently, gently...hold you.

Like when we were kids, I will comfort you, who was severely scolded for going out to see that fireworks festival.

That's right.

In that area, nothing about Shirayuki has changed.

But--she has become strong.

Strong enough to break out of the cage the Hotogi instilled on her own, strong enough to flap her own wings of flame, strong enough to fight for her own beliefs.

Shirayuki, sobbing while looking up at me, seemed to be calming down--

"After this...you can't disappear without a sound anymore, Shirayuki."

And once again, directly to her face, I smiled.

Last Ammo: Who Performed the Last Move?

"I'd like to thank the person..."

With the cool Shiranui's voice, and my guitar's sound, the Adseard closing ceremony, Aru=Kata, had started.

Before, in the underground warehouse, I, who had once again entered Hysteria Mode in front of Shirayuki and Aria, noticed something about how I was playing the guitar...

There was a very strong sense of abandonment in that sound...

Ahhh.

...How could I say those words...

What was 'You can't disappear without a sound anymore, Shirayuki'?

And to Aria, didn't I say something I would never be able to take back? How could I say 'for as long as I live'.

Once I thought about this...I had an extremely strong urge to commit suicide.

If it was just that, I'd at least be able to blame the circumstances...But in front of Aria and Shirayuki, I discovered Jeanne's disguise, figured out a way to counter with such alacrity, and I caught her sword with my bare hand...I might not have been that way from the start, but it was still too outstanding.

With that, I created another reason for Shirayuki and Aria to think that I'm amazing.

After that incident, I was barraged with compliments like "If you try, you can do it!" "Kin-chan is amazing after all," etc...It pains me just to think about it.

And with that, Aria's feeling that I was driven into action whenever I was in a tight situation was confirmed...in her mind.

And, it's definitely those tight situations with bullets flying everywhere, and swords clashing.

"Who shoot the flash..." (English)

Really, Butei High is...way too tightfisted with the budget, would it really be so bad to have a professional band?

Before this, I had been pretty rusty with the guitar, but now, I had grown used to the guitar, and I blasted the DC59's noise over the second field. Bb, Gm, Cm7.

Damn it, the weather is too good.

"Who flash the shot like the bangbabangbang'a" (English)

While the song suddenly sped up, the cheerleaders, Pom Poms in both hands, ran onto stage, smiling.

"A-as expected, this is too..."



Hearing this voice, I glanced to one side, and I saw Shirayuki, extremely embarrassed, standing at the entrance to the stage--

"Ah, really! You're already here and you're complaining! Alright, get out there!"

As if being kicked onto the stage by Aria, Shirayuki ran in, and in the center too.

Whoosh. Standing next to Shirayuki, blushing and raising her Pom Poms, was Aria.

This squad of cheerleaders were headed by the most athletic Aria, as well as the person that Aria forcefully recommended, Shirayuki, who was chosen to be her partner at the last moment. Because the Preparatory Committee had Shirayuki in mind in the first place, this suggestion seemed to be taken on board fairly easily.

At the start, I was a bit worried about Shirayuki, not knowing whether she could perform well on her first time. However, when she came onstage, as expected of an honors student, she performed a perfect routine in front of the audience.

Wearing those kinds of clothes in front of everybody made her face tense up, extremely embarrassed, but Shirayuki, it really is your horrible luck to be targeted by Aria. If she ever gets stuck to you, you'll never get her off. She's like an electromagnet...one that's linked to a power plant.

"Each time we're in froooooooooont of enemies! We never hide'n sneak away!" (English.)

For Shirayuki, having the courage to stand in front of others like this, was all because of the battle.

You've already left the school with Kinji, and then you released your forbidden arts. Since you've already broken the rules, then you should just break as many as you want!

She was encouraged this way by Aria, and she burst through the dam, agreeing to take part in cheerleading.

But no matter what one says, defeating Durandal like that was a good experience for her--at least, that's what I think. Well, it might be cheerleading now, but I understand, Shirayuki.

You're no longer a 'Caged Bird'.

You might only be able to fly close to the nest, but you're already a bird who can use her own wings to fly--that's right, mmm, a crane. You've already transformed into a red-crowned crane.

The reason I was thinking about this kind of thing, was because I was unwilling to think about Hysteria Mode--

That enormous pair of Mount Fujis...were vigorously...shaking...!

Th-this isn't good. I'm going to change.

But, I can't. I'm right in front of the crowd, I can't turn my eyes away like in practice.

I have to find a way! I turned my gaze towards Aria, next to Shirayuki.

--What a relief.

These mounds will stay stationary, not moving at all.

But, I can't become careless.

This place has risk as well. Because Aria was so tiny, her clothes were a little loose.

There are volcanoes everywhere I look. It's very possible that I could enter a situation far more dangerous than the one in the underground warehouse. If I enter Hysteria Mode in a place crowded with girls like this, I'm finished.

In short, I have to think of something else.

Hmm.

Well, those things may have happened underground, but Butei High wasn't blown to pieces, and we safely returned to the Adseard closing ceremony...hmm.

"Who flash the shot like the bangbabangbabang'a" (English.)

That's right, Jeanne. Jeanne d'Arc the 30th. As ordered by the police and the Tokyo Butei Section, she was first to be questioned by Tsuduri-sensei from Dagula.

When we gave Jeanne, staying silent, to Tsuduri, Tsuduri said "She looks very...teasable," with a smile that chilled me to the very bones. That kind of smile...it's the first time I've seen it.

"Who was the person, I'd like to hug the body." (English.) In sync, the girls, Pa!

threw their Pom Poms into the air, and the atmosphere in the field heated up.

In their hands were their guns, previously hidden underneath their skirts. And like the lyrics in their song, they fired blanks up into the air. And I'm not sure if it was on purpose, or whether they had gotten excited, but it was far more than in rehearsals.

Aahh...that's why I said, don't have these kinds of festivals.

The aim of this festival is to make Butei's reputation, in the eyes of the people, better, right?

I just hope that the cameramen will cut this out during editing.

Finally--

The girls crowded around Aria and Shirayuki, and they formed a stance like in gymnastics.

The confetti, stored in the top of the stage, was scattered all around the girls--

"It makes my life change at all dramatic!" (English.)

With that, Adseard was over.

Because of the exertion during the Aru=Kata cheerleading routine, Shirayuki was breathing hard, flashing an unabashed smile at the crowd. Confetti was flying all around, as if congratulating her for starting a clean, white new life.

...Why is the congratulatory party being held in the family restaurant?

The first congratulatory party for us guys in the band was held in here too. Weren't you going to the Estella Club in Odaiba? You two get out of here and go over there.

However, my protests were in vain, as usual. Therefore, there was a second congratulatory party held, the participants being Shirayuki, Aria, and me. It was being held in the only family restaurant on Academy Island, Roxi.

Because we captured Durandal, the falsely charged mother of Aria--Kanzaki Kanae-san's sentence was reduced by a lot, so Aria was overjoyed, and she announced "Today is on me!" This was the only thing that could possibly be construed as good for me, but anyways, you're nobility. Couldn't you have chosen a better store than this?

However, if I were to actually say that, she'd definitely blast a hole in me, so I just chose the most expensive steak set in order to express my dissatisfaction.

When we had all ordered, and wiped our hands...

I noticed that Aria and Shirayuki were a little weird.

They were looking at each other, and they seemed to want to say something, but neither of them could open their mouths.

...What kind of atmosphere is this.

"Ab-about that." "Ab-about that."

Shirayuki and Aria opened their mouths at the same time.

"Ah, you go first."

"No, you should."

"...Do you want me to leave?"

I said to Shirayuki, sitting next to me. She violently shook her head, and then dipped it.

"Umm, Th...this, I want Kin-chan to hear this too. I...no matter what, I have something I need to say to Aria."

...She wants me to hear something, and it's also something that she has to say to Aria?

"About that...Before, when Kin-chan had a cold...I lied."

"Lied?"

"Yeah...um...the medicine that Kin-chan took...wasn't bought by me. That probably....was something that Aria had put there, right?"

Huh?

Just now, the medicine that was for me when I had a fever...

The specially bought 'Special Pueraria Syrup', the person that quietly put that on the door...

"It was, Aria?"

"..."

Watching Aria, who was staying silent, Shirayuki seemed extremely apologetic.

Aria, seeing Shirayuki in that state, turned her camellia eyes to one side, facing me.

...What is that supposed to mean?

"Wh-what is that supposed to mean?"

Aria seemed to put her hands behind her head on purpose, tilting back really far.

And her face, blushing slightly now, glanced at me again.

Ah.

I remember now. When we were on the roof of Assault, Aria said...

"A noble does not show off her efforts. Because that's extremely unsightly. Even if her efforts are taken by someone else."

That...

Is this what that was supposed to mean?

"Hearing you say there's 'something' you have to say, I thought it was something important, you really made me worry over nothing."

She didn't deny it, so I guess it really was Aria.

Then that means, at that time, the person who checked my temperature so gently, was Aria as well?

However, Aria placed her fingertips on Shirayuki's chin, pushing her back.

"I didn't take notice of that. Alright, that's over and done with. Then, it's my turn."

"Mm, mm."

It looks like those two, before coming here, got ready to say 'something' to each other.

"Ahem, ahem."

Aria cleared her throat, and assumed a new stance.

"--Shirayuki. Be my slave as well!"

Whoosh! Her finger pointing towards Shirayuki, Aria's words--

Made Shirayuki, I, and even the boys sitting in the booth next to us, freeze. Ah, hey. Don't look this way.

"Thank you, Shirayuki."

And you, Aria.

You aren't even giving anybody enough time to scratch their head before you finish what you were saying?

"In terms of the reason we were able to catch Durandal, 30% of the reason was you. 40% was me, and 20% was Reki."

...What?

"After this battle, I understood. Fighting with that Durandal, Jeanne d'Arc--if we had split up and taken her one-on-one, we would have definitely failed. It's the combined powers of us three that finally defeated her. That, I recognize."

I've wanted you to recognize this since so long ago...But, I was part of those three people, right?

"The reason we could achieve victory was teamwork. From the beginning, I--no matter the enemy, I would engage them by myself, with the partner that allowed me to draw out my abilities. But in reality...there are still enemies that we can't defeat with just us two. Which also means, if we

have somebody with a special ability, we should be fine. Especially you, Shirayuki, a companion who has a power I don't."

Ooh.

Companion, huh?

It looks like this [Aria]-san has learned something of use in this school of ours.

But Shirayuki, who she was pointing at, was whispering "Sl-slave...how could I...but, if Kin-chan is a slave..."--things like that, and she didn't seem to be listening.

"Your contract may be over now, but from now on, you should act together with Kinji! After this, we will do things together as a group, cultivating our team coordination! Here, this is the key to Kinji's room! After this, you can come whenever you like!"

"Thank you Aria! Thank you Kinji!"

"OOOOOOOIII!"

Seeing Aria drop the key into Shirayuki's chest pocket with inhuman speed, I fell down off my chair with a thud.

"No way, no way, that's impossible! That's a boy's dormitory!"

"Is there something wrong, slave #1?"

"You! Two! Never listen to me...If you listen to me, I'll be very happy...could you possibly rethink this?"

The volume of my voice suddenly plummeted, reason being, Aria had drawn her guns in the middle of my sentence.

At that moment, the waitress brought over what we had ordered, slightly scared.

Mineral water, and a steak set. Oolong Tea and risotto. As well as Coca-Cola and peach-bun-don...what is that? The person who made this menu, get out here.

"Alright! To the birth of slave #2 Cheeeeeeeers!"

"Ganbai!...I'm so happy! I'm really so happy! This key...is the proof of Kin-chan's love!"

I, slave #1, under the cheers of Aria, who was so happy that her eyes were closed, and Shirayuki, who was brought to tears from joy, had been completely taken advantage of.

Aah, really...

"Whatever!"

As if trying to knock the liquid out of the cup, my cup collided with theirs.

Because of this, these two troublesome entities continued to come in and out of my house.

Right after leaving the family restaurant, Shirayuki carried everything she would need back to my room, and Aria was watching the second episode of the animal space fantasy special, happily shouting "So~Cu~te~! Kinji, come look, come look! It's a pack of otters!" while jumping up and down on my sofa.

Her shoes were messily thrown around the entrance. Her black stockings were left unattended on the floor as well. Hey, you didn't forget that this is my room, Aria-san?

"Aria, about your calculations just now in the family restaurant."

Unsatisfied, I sat down besides Aria, who was about to skip over the advertisement.

"What is it?"

"I'm talking about you splitting the reason of why Durandal was captured. You had 40%, Shirayuki had 30%, and Reki had 20%...which means, I had but 10%."

I complained,

"You were only useful at the end!"

Aria continued to press on the controller, not even bothering to look at me while responding.

"...Then I really feel like voiding our relationship as partners."

"However, you were pretty cool then, you know?"

Aria, who was extremely happy about watching otters, turned her head...Pa.

and winked.

You, you...

Just turning around like that and winking at me so gently. That's breaking the rules. That's way too cute.

I felt like my heart had been shot through by a mini-arrow.

"Partner-san, I've stopped my recording for you, so you listen well, OK? You...are on the same level as Shirayuki. The situation was very different from last time, but you have, for me, a necessary power for all those of the Holmes bloodline. After the battle, I once again acknowledged this. That's why, making up for what I lack, you are--"

Aria sat on the sofa, turning to face me.

It looks like, before saying that final sentence, she wants to sit down on the same level as me.

"--important to me."

Those camellia eyes that belonged to Aria, staring straight at me--rendered me speechless.

She...How self-centered is she, exactly?

But, I, right now, felt that there was no way I could resist, because that small girl sitting in front of me...Damn it, it's because she's so cute, right?

N-no, that's not it, Kinji.

This is definitely because she just looks like a kid.

This is because I can't deny a child. Yeah, that has to be it.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY JUST NOW?!"

From behind us, a hysterical voice rang out.

--Oh, oh shit!

My face paled, and I looked back.

Behind the sofa,

"-important to me! What is that supposed to mean!"

I don't need to say this, but it was a berserking Shirayuki.

I-I said that this was really scary, Shirayuki!

Those eyes spinning like that, I can't even tell what you're focusing on!

What set you off! You could just tell me that, you know! For my own safety!

"I'm warning you! Aria!"

"What is it! What's wrong!"

Aria couldn't help but retreat under the face of the demonized Shirayuki.
Shi.

She stepped on thin air, and she fell onto the ground.

"Don't think that you've won! I-I-I ki-kissed Kin-chan too--!"

Shirayuki raised her katana, which suddenly appeared in her hands, jumping over the sofa, slicing down towards Aria.

"Wh-what did you say!?"

Aria, suddenly hearing about kissing again, blushed furiously, rolling to one-side, dodging Shirayuki's attack.

KACHAK!

Aah, the table is broken again...

"A draw! I'm saying it's a draw! Us! In Kin-chan's heart! Our level is the same! I, after this! As long as I'm one step ahead it'll be fine! That's what I mean!"

Shirayuki yelled these random reasons, and started waving her blade around. KCH! KACH! She once again obliterated all the new furniture we had bought.

"Ah, hey, slave #2! You're just a slave, and yet you dare do this to your master! Quiet down!"

Aria, continuously evading Shirayuki's attacks, finally--Bang!

Fired a warning shot. She made a hole in the ceiling with her pitch-black M1911.

I'm sorry, our neighbors, I'm really very sorry.

"Yo-yo-you're just a concubine--You're still so shameless after stealing my man!"

Shirayuki was completely unintimidated.

Her eyebrows, under her neat fringe, were completely raised, and she charged towards Aria.

Aaah, I can't. I can't stop it anymore.

"Kin-Kinji! How did you kiss Shirayuki! Yo-yo-you did this sort of thing with your client!? Yo-you shameless Butei! Think of something to take her out!"

Oh, Aria.

Making that slave #2 go crazy was you.

Anyways, for my own safety, before her rage turns towards me, I'm going to get away from this Armed Miko.

Thinking this way, I stumbled...

Through the living room, onto the balcony.

Click.

This is a bulletproof cabinet.

"The aftermath is up to you guys to take care of!"

During these few days, I've learned one thing.

Quadra Aria. Armed Miko Shirayuki. If it involves these two, in the end, only my hated Hysteria Mode could possibly defuse the situation.

Anyways, if I have to continuously evade them and not enter Hysteria Mode, as well as continually doing missions with them, it won't matter how many lives I have, there won't be enough.

If the situation really becomes this bad...

Then I will need to enter Hysteria Mode again.

But there's still a lot of problems.

Hysteria Mode is something that can't be activated by yourself. My brother could...but that method is far too difficult for me.

And afterward, there will be problems as well. Girls will like my new personality, and it will become a vicious circle, making me continually enter Hysteria Mode, just like in Middle School.

But the biggest problem is, the arousal that is my trigger to Hysteria Mode. I cannot expose that, no matter the cost.

Aah, really...

There are too many problems, I really don't know what to do.

Whatever, a way to solve these problems...I'll wait for the next time I enter Hysteria Mode to think about it.

"Kinji! Come help me! Or else--"

Well, the thing I need to do right now is--

"I'll blast a hole in you!"

I ignored Aria's shrill voice.

Creak. I opened the door to the cabinet with that noise.

And again, I should pray.

I hope when tomorrow comes, I'll still be alive.

Epilogue: Go For the Next!!

Normally, one's own home should be a place where one can be at peace, right?

But my house, which still houses Aria, and the person who just comes in whenever she likes, openly doing household chores, Shirayuki. Together, they made everything extremely feminine, making me extremely uneasy.

I can't take it anymore. Please spare me.

This situation led to me, not refusing to go to school, but refusing to come back from school. After school today, us three representatives of laziness--Muto, Shiranui, and I--were in the self-study room, playing a round of self-study poker.

After 7:00 PM...when I, because Muto kept on winning, (he's always this strong, but he isn't cheating though...is he?) was feeling bored...my cellphone rang.

I was thinking that if it was Aria was calling, I wouldn't answer it, but the number that appeared had a 03 prefix. It wasn't from a cellphone. Who could it be?

"Hello."

"Kinji? Where are you."

Ah, it's Aria.

"It doesn't matter where I am. What is it?"

"Come here quickly. Girl's dormitory room 1011."

"I don't want to go to the girl's dormitory."

"Shut up! If I say come now, then come right now! Or I'll make a hole in you!"

Click.

She gives me no room to negotiate at all.

My master cut off the line.

So I, unwillingly...really unwillingly, went to the room 1011 of the girl's dormitory...and noticed the door wasn't locked.

There was a higher ratio of single-person rooms in the girl's dormitory than the boy's dormitory, I guess it applies to this.

Anyways, is this Aria's room?

"Hey, I'm here, Aria."

"You're late. I'll forgive you today, though."

I had just entered when I noticed that Aria, wearing a sailor uniform, running out of the changing room.

And she suddenly squeezed my hand.

"Ah, hey, what is this?"

"Come over here."

Being pulled into the living room, I--

"Uu...?"

was stunned by the scene that lay before me.

Under the illumination of pink candles, there were numerous amounts of clothes scattered around.

--And the types of clothes were extremely inordinate.

There was a waitress uniform to some unknown restaurant. There were Miko garments, akin to what Shirayuki wears. A large kindergarten uniform. An accessory like cat ears and even a tail. A red backpack with a clarinet sticking out of it. A pumpkin shaped...I'm afraid it was underwear. And others.

"Kinji, which one is good?"

"Which one...? What do you mean?"

"Mmm, really, Kinji. Is it because you've been constantly avoiding this kind of life that you're exactly like a log? I'm asking you, which cosplay do you want me to wear?"

Completely overwhelmed by the atmosphere here, I could find nothing to say--

Aria's Eichornia eyes squinted, and with 1 step, 2 steps, she started walking towards me.

"Heh."

Aria's feet, wearing black knee-socks, trod on my toes, Thud!

and pushed me, standing there, dazed--

pomf.

I was pushed onto the bed, lying on my back.

"Kinji?"

Quickly, Aria sat astride my body like a little kid, and suddenly,

Thrust her torso into my face.

Not even giving me time to compose myself.

--I'm going to change--this uncomfortable feeling, could only be sustained for a moment.

Her clothes pressed against my face, and the feeling of breasts as soft as cotton candy came with it. Straddling my waist, came the feeling of extremely flexible thighs. I was enveloped by that sweet, feminine scent.

Within a few seconds, I suddenly changed.

I entered Hysteria Mode.

"!"

In that moment, a thought flashed into the forefront of my brain.

And at the same time, the blood froze in my veins.

Saying this is extremely rude, but Aria's breasts could not be this full. She may be wearing a push-up bra, but I've had them pressed into my face before, so I'm very clear.

And this, was the feeling of another girl's body that I've experienced--

It's got to be--!

--Riko--

I said, sharply and softly.

"Bingo! I did it, I did it! Ki-kun went into Hysteria Mode! He's regained his power!"

Aria's--appearance was still there, but the voice was Riko's. With a *Pa*, her torso straightened.

Her haoru shook from under her uniform, and with putting her right hand below her face, she put her left on one of her twin-tails...

Shiiii, pa.

She tore the layer of special makeup off her face, and she removed her pink twin-tails.

And under that face, was as I thought--

"It's Riko! Hehe! I'm back!"

Riko.

She killed my brother, and she placed a bomb on my bike and on the Butei High schoolbus--during the plane-jacking incident, we fought with her, but she ran away-- the 'Butei Killer' Mine Riko Lupin the 4th.

Why did she come back to Butei High--!?

Riko, her eyes sparkling like stars, closed, and with a *Shh* she took her long honey-colored curly hair from under her wig.

"Ki-kun, save Riko please."

--Thud. My heart beat furiously.

The me in Hysteria Mode--

Will find it impossible to resist helping girls.

If we meet any difficulty, and a girl in danger pleads for help, then I'll definitely do as she says, and give my all.

Riko obviously...knows about this, which is why she said that.

"You know, Riko spent a lot of effort going to two schools--but because of Aria and Ki-kun, I've been expelled from I-U, you know? Hmm."

Expelled from I-U...?

"Riko has something that she needs Ki-kun to do. So get ready, this is the first time I'm going to use the method that mother gave me to get boys to listen, you know. After this, you're going to buy Riko's specialty for customers, a sweet, sweet reward, got it?"

Riko's excited breathing, so much like that of an animal, had something hot mixed in, and she pulled off my tie.

In this situation, what she'll say is really obvious.

What do I do?

Riko--that childish face approached my own, and she used those alluring lips--to say...

"Ki-kun, shall we do 'H' stuff?"

What do you do, Kinji?

References

1. ↑ In Japanese "Chounouryoku" means "supernatural ability" or "super ability" and can be also translated into "psychic ability". The "Chou" from "Chounouryoku" is combined with the "tei" from "Butei" to form the name "Choutei" (ie: Superbutei).
2. ↑ Italian word for weapon is Arma. Arma written in katakana is Aruma. Japanese word for form is Kata. Therefore, Aru=Kata.
3. ↑ Pun meaning cheerleading Aria and chibi(tiny) Aria.
4. ↑ Literally Demon Path Arts.
5. ↑ Putting on cat skin: Acting cute in front of others. Something a girl might do in front of her boyfriend.
6. ↑ It is difficult to put an obi by yourself.
7. ↑ Bura Bura (ブラブラ) is a stroll. Bura (ブラ) is a bra.
8. ↑ Lit. Scarlet Miko.
9. ↑ Lit. Scarlet Divide.
10. ↑ Lit. Scarlet Crusher.
11. ↑ Lit Flower of the Ice of Orleans.
12. ↑ Tohyama used "Ojou", "young lady" would be the closest equivalent. Used to refer to little girls or girls that are of superior social standing. Extremely polite and at times personal.
13. ↑ Blazing Scarlet God of Hotogi.
14. ↑ The person. This is clear in the Japanese raws because the name is written in Kanji, while the sword is written in katakana.

アリア 2巻

ということぞ。

■挿絵を描かせて
いただいております
こぶいちです。
アリアも2巻ですよ！
めでたい。またこうして
アリア達を描けるのは
嬉しく有難い限りです。

■今回は白雪の色々な
表情を描けて楽しかった
です。チアアリアも
チア白雪も。
ということで
サービスすごいな！
赤松先生。
チアは趣味ですか。

■今回の新キャラちゃん
本編では制服を着てる
イラストを描く機会が
なかったのでここで。
こう、割と色々と
マメな子だなあという
印象でした。
今回限り
なんでしょーかー
また出てくるといいな。
と思ったり



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Generated on Tue Apr 23 17:27:33 2013